Author:
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Illustrator:
Touko Shino

3

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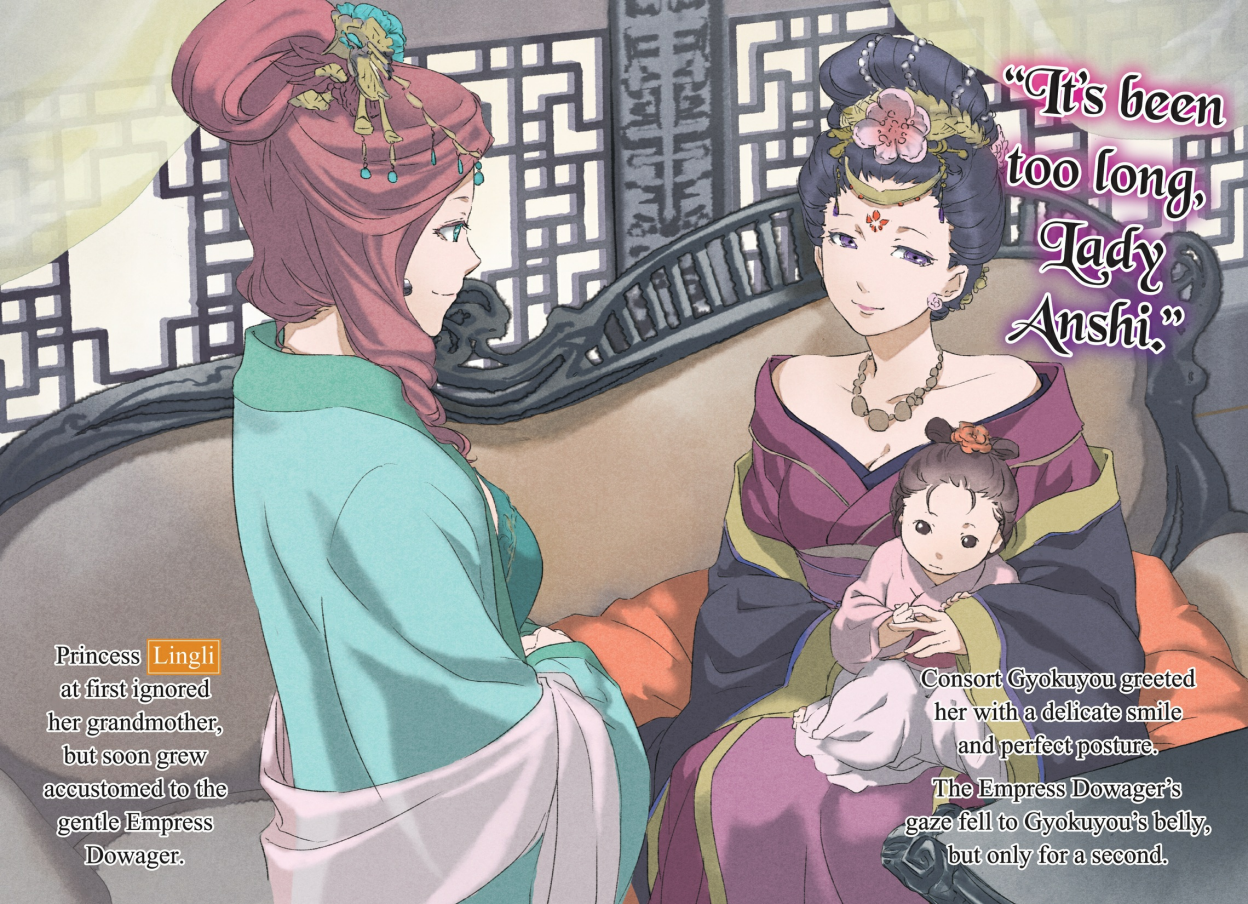
"It looks like so much fun!"
Palace women walked gaily among the tents set up in the plaza.
Xiaolan still seemed like a girl in some ways.

"This is a story that comes from a country far to the east."
Shisui slid the cloth off her head and held her flame up near her face.


"It's been too long, Lady Anshi."
Princess Lingli at first ignored her grandmother, but soon grew accustomed to the gentle Empress Dowager.
Consort Gyokuyou greeted her with a delicate smile and perfect posture.
The Empress Dowager's gaze fell to Gyokuyou's belly, but only for a second.

Take off your clothes, Master Jinshi.

Then Maomao began to work on her overgarment. The robe was still heavy. She decided to refrain from removing the simple clothes that covered her front and her hips, at least.

There might not be much to hide on her body, but she wanted to hide what there was.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

Reading Pleasure

Welcome to volume 3 of the hit series *The Apothecary Diaries.* Mystery fans have given rave reviews to the story of Maomao, food-tester extraordinaire and solver of one head-scratching palace puzzle after another: "It feels amazing to read." "My heart was racing." "Maomao is such a tsundere I can't stand it!"

Here in the third volume, our heroine returns to the rear palace. Among the plotting, maneuvering women, she'll come face-to-face with a new and even more challenging mystery. And wait until an unknown stranger comes for her life…

There's no question, you'll love this volume!

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Prologue

Footsteps echoed down the hall: *clack*, *clack*. His own steps and the sound of his ball bouncing were almost all he could hear. Maybe the yawning of the woman minding him. His usual wet nurse was away, and he had a new attendant. The owner of the footsteps came closer; it was someone very old.

His minder rose to her feet, stepping forward protectively. She spoke deferentially to the old man, but he ignored her and continued his tottering advance, reaching out toward the boy. His white hair was disheveled, his eyes sunken, yet there were only a few wrinkles on his hand, showing that he was in fact younger than he first seemed.

A woman appeared in the room, perhaps summoned by the sound of his minder's voice. It was his mother. She walked over at a brisk trot and stood between him and the interloper, staring the old man down.

The man let out a keening cry. He seemed to be scared of the boy's mother. Frightened by the way the man's body twisted, the boy threw his ball aside and clung to his minder. Still the old man tried to approach; he seemed to want to communicate something. His outstretched hand was in a fist; he was holding something tightly. The boy's mother wielded a large fan, trying to keep the man back. She glared at him, with none of the gentle calm that was normally in her eyes, but instead a burning flame. The man was afraid of the flame, like a wild beast; he froze where he stood.

Soon, several more men came in from the hallway. They had only scraggly beards; the boy knew that they were called eunuchs. Finally, trailing after them appeared an old woman, looking supremely calm. She wore an elaborate ornamental hair stick that jangled like a bell, and at the sound the attendants organized themselves into a neat line. The boy's minder and his mother both knelt. He thought this meant he should kneel too. The woman looked even older than the old man, but there was a bright light in her eyes, her gaze sharp enough to pierce. The boy felt himself shiver.

He thought he had seen the woman several times before. She was someone very important, that much he remembered; the young ladies-in-

waiting had said nobody dared to go against her.

The old woman touched the old man. “Come, now. Back to your room.” Her voice was gentle, soothing, but the man took fright again, huddling close to the wall. He curled himself up and the boy could hear his teeth chattering, could tell his whole body was trembling. A sparkling object tumbled out of the man’s clasped hand, drawing the boy’s attention in spite of himself. It was a colorful stone, the hue hovering somewhere between vermillion and turmeric.

He had seen it somewhere before. What was it? The vibrant color struck some deep chord, but he simply couldn’t remember.

The old woman furrowed her brow and turned her back on the man, wholly ignoring everyone else in the room. Now the eunuchs stepped forward, coaxing and cajoling him until they could lead him back out of the residence.

The boy observed every minute of this, still clinging close to his minder. He had no idea what it was all about; the only thing he felt was fear.

Then there was his mother, though, kneeling beside him; she fixed a scorching glare on the retreating woman. Who must that old man and lady be, the boy wondered, to provoke such a scathing expression from his normally placid mother?

It would be sometime later before he learned. The man was his father, he was told, and the old woman his grandmother.

The man he had always believed was his father, he found out, was his own older brother.

It wasn’t yet the season when it was difficult to sleep, yet Jinshi awoke with his bedclothes soaked in sweat. He sat up in bed, feeling ill, and grabbed for the pitcher on the table, bringing it quickly to his lips. The water within had been mixed with a touch of fruit juice and honey, deeply refreshing to his dehydrated body.

He could see moonlight coming in through the window.

They said something bad always happened after a nightmare. Or was that just superstition? Jinshi took a breath and put the water back on the table. There were still hours before dawn. He ought to go back to sleep; if he didn’t, his minder Gaoshun would be upset with him.

Still, when one can’t sleep, one can’t sleep. There’s no use forcing the

matter. And when one couldn’t sleep, the solution was to work the body until one was tired.

Jinshi took down an imitation sword sitting on one of his shelves. It was a training blade with a dull edge, built to be especially short and heavy. He made a wide one-handed sweep. He wished he could do this outside, but it would only be a headache for him if his guards realized what he was doing. They still might notice him here in his room, but at least if he stayed inside they might see fit to look the other way.

His room, though, was not particularly suited to sword practice. He had a solution: he decided to perform the routine on one foot. After going through the entire routine once, he would switch feet and hands and do it again. He did this several times, until it began to get light outside.

Jinshi lay spread-eagle on the ground to cool off his body, warmed by the exercise. Maybe he would have them prepare a bath for him, he thought, but then the face of a displeased palace woman floated through his mind. Her expression always revealed how she felt about him taking a bath first thing in the morning and then applying copious perfume. But he couldn’t go to work reeking of sweat. If he was going to play the part of the flawless eunuch, Jinshi, he had to at least smell decent.

He couldn’t just tell her that, though—that was what was so annoying. Yet neither, he thought, could he remain silent on the matter forever. She was a sharp one, that woman; surely she must suspect something by now. Perhaps she had already discerned the truth and was merely pretending not to have noticed. Well, it would certainly make the conversation easier...

Jinshi stood up, put the training sword back in its place, and then collapsed back on his bed. He didn’t bother to change his clothes. He still had a few minutes before his attendant Suiren came to wake him. He could at least grab a moment’s rest before that.

He just had to be careful he wasn’t taken by the urge to yawn at work, he told himself.

Chapter 1: Books

"*What* are you doing?" asked the thoroughly perplexed eunuch Jinshi, who looked as gorgeous as he always did. His attendant Gaoshun stood behind him.

"I should think that would be obvious," Maomao said, wiping away sweat as she stood over a burning cookstove. Beside her was the quack doctor, fanning himself with his hand and obviously finding the heat rather unpleasant. While he worked assiduously—Maomao needed an assistant, what with her leg still healing—she couldn't help thinking his movements were as flabby as he was. Maybe she was hoping for too much.

They were using the cookstove in the medical office to heat a very unusual stewpot. From the lid of the pot emerged a long tube that ran through some cool water, causing droplets to form at the end, where they were then collected in a small vessel. This distilling device was one of the discoveries of their recent cleaning spree. It pained Maomao to know that such a valuable object had sat unused in a storage room for so long. The air was full of the smell of flowers; a bevy of petals occupied the pot.

"We're making perfume," Maomao said. She had a wonderful source of petals in the roses she had cultivated for the garden party not long before.

"It's certainly...aromatic."

"The smell is fairly mild compared to wild roses. And we'll thin it out further with oil and water."

Over the generations, humans had fashioned roses to their liking, favoring beauty and richness of color at the expense of smell. That was simply the way of the world; you couldn't ask for everything or you would get nothing.

Jinshi peered at the distiller interestedly. When the doctor, who had been industriously transporting firewood, realized the other man was there, he started brushing the dust and dirt off his clothes with all the self-consciousness of an adolescent girl. Smoothing his mustache and beard with his fingers, he asked, "To what do we owe the honor, sir?"

Jinshi's face darkened; Maomao didn't think the doctor meant anything

by his question, but Jinshi seemed to resent the way it had been asked. “No one could fail to notice a smell this strong,” he replied, his lips forming into a slight pout. Nearby, Gaoshun’s brow furrowed.

He thinks Jinshi needs more gravitas, Maomao guessed. The quack doctor was oblivious enough that it didn’t much matter, but being important meant never looking less than distinguished.

Maomao got up from her chair, took some tea snacks from a shelf (she was well aware by now that the quack kept his most valuable treats on the highest one), and put them on the table. Jinshi sat down; Maomao picked up a mooncake, took a bite for good measure to show that it wasn’t dangerous, and then passed them to him.

“I suppose you’re doing this here because it would be more difficult at the Jade Pavilion,” Jinshi said.

“Yes, that’s part of it.” Maomao wiped the grease off her fingers and resumed her place by the cookstove. She changed the vessel at the end of the tube for a different one. After a moment, a greasy substance began to fill it: perfume oil. “The other part is this: perfume oil contains an ingredient that can potentially abort a pregnancy. As long as a woman doesn’t drink a concentrated dose of the stuff, she should be fine, but still...”

She glanced around, making sure the quack wasn’t too close. He was a very friendly person, but he had loose lips. It was too soon to let him know that the mistress of the Jade Pavilion, Consort Gyokuyou, was pregnant.

“In other words, there’s no special need to regulate the perfume oil being used in the rear palace, is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, sir, I think it should be all right.” Making rules about every little detail would only make their lives harder. Besides, enforcement would be difficult in such a large place.

Jinshi looked at the other pot on the stove. It didn’t have a pleasant fragrance like the one full of rose petals; instead, breathing whatever was in this pot made his head spin. “What’s this one?” he asked.

“That’s alcohol,” Maomao said.

Through repeated distillation, it was possible to achieve a very high concentration of alcohol. Indeed, this stuff was strong enough to make Jinshi feel drunk just by taking a sniff. It wasn’t for drinking, but would be used for sterilization. The warm season was coming, when bad air could accumulate and cause physical harm. With a little princess at the Jade Pavilion, they

would want everything to be as clean as possible. Maomao was even making a bit more than she needed so she could leave a supply here at the medical office, where it would see plenty of use.

"You can use it to clean things?" Jinshi asked.

"Yes; I hear that's what they do in the west." This was one of the little factoids she'd gleaned from hearing about her adoptive father's experiences studying in the western lands. If there was anything at all that set her apart, Maomao thought, it was the knowledge she'd gotten from him.

"As I recall, the man who adopted you was—"

Before Jinshi could finish, though, they heard a great *thump*. Gaoshun poked his head outside to see what it was. Two eunuchs had arrived at the medical office with a massive box and had set it down just outside the door.

"What's this about?" Gaoshun inquired of the doctor.

"Ah, the young lady requested it."

Maomao glared at the quack to shut him up, but she was too late. Jinshi had already taken an interest in the delivery, beginning to unpack it. She wished he wouldn't touch it without asking.

"Master Jinshi, the tea is ready. Please, have a seat and enjoy it," she said.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Just something from my home. Nothing of interest, I assure you."

Unfortunately, Jinshi looked very intrigued indeed. *I can't believe this guy*, Maomao thought. She—yes, even she—was a woman. She wished he would have the decency not to look at a moment like this. But instead she cast her eyes to the ground and said, "I-It's full of underwear, sir."

Jinshi promptly took his hand away, looking unsettled. *That's right, just leave it alone*, Maomao thought at him without looking up, but reality is rarely so accommodating.

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“Just how much underwear is in there that it took two grown men to carry it?” Gaoshun asked. Leave it to him to notice the most inconvenient details.

“You’re right!” Jinshi exclaimed, and thus the contents of Maomao’s delivery, which she would have been just as happy for him to remain oblivious to, were unveiled for all to see.

“Fastidiousness, that’s the problem with the rear palace,” Maomao said, her back straight and her face utterly serious.

The ladies who comprised the residents of the rear palace were a collection of innocent virgins who hoped they might one day become the Emperor’s bedmates. Admittedly, not everyone was like that, but such exceptions were a minority.

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that His Majesty’s Imperial eye fell upon one of the virgins. Not only would she have the intimidation of being with the Emperor himself, she would be embarking upon completely unknown experiences with him.

“Imagine the consternation of the young woman who commits some novice blunder under those circumstances. I would argue they need to learn the basics ahead of time.”

“And that’s why you’ve acquired all...*this*?”

Jinshi was standing imperiously in front of Maomao, who sat in a formal posture on the ground. The situation felt oddly familiar.

The delivery sat open, a great deal of literature visible inside. What kind of literature? Well...*you* know. The kind Maomao had already been acquiring in some quantity to comfort a lonely Emperor when he found himself pining away at night. Consort Lihua was likewise an avid reader of such material. This time Maomao had decided to get more than usual, in hopes of finding new sales opportunities here and there—but the timing of their arrival had been truly terrible.

She’d had this batch delivered to the medical office so she could finally escape the gaze of the persnickety Hongniang, but look what it had gotten her. Maomao was by no means avaricious, but if she didn’t manage to earn a modicum of money, her old man back in the pleasure district might not have enough to eat. He was such a soft touch, her old man; she was sure the madam would badger him into working nonstop.

Jinshi was openly exasperated, but he also seemed to sense the truth of

what Maomao was saying. When she added that this request came in part from His Majesty himself, Jinshi looked deeply conflicted, but recognized she was in the right.

Gaoshun, meanwhile, was flipping through one of the books with a studious expression. The entire scene was so surreal that Maomao found herself scowling at it in spite of herself.

"This is exceptionally beautifully made," Gaoshun commented.

He's admiring the craftsmanship? Maomao thought. She'd been entertaining the possibility that Gaoshun was the world's most poker-faced lecher, but apparently that wasn't what had attracted his interest.

"They use fine paper," she said.

Books about the bedchamber were hot sellers; they were often sent with young women when they went to wife, and those who read such texts for personal interest were more than willing to spend the money on them. Such books typically consisted mostly of illustrations, so one didn't have to be literate to enjoy them. And as much as they cost, the potential profits they might engender could be equally great.

"Are these printed?" Jinshi was likewise studying the illustrations, but considering what they were illustrations of, the moment was plainly comical. The quack doctor stole embarrassed little glances here and there.

"Not with wood blocks, but with metal plates, I'm given to understand."

"That's really something."

It was a western technique. Maomao didn't know much about how the books were made, but for Jinshi to say something admiring about them, they must be quite unusual.

"Since I finally got my hands on some high-quality materials, I thought it might be best to disseminate them more widely," Maomao said.

"That's a different issue," Jinshi shot back. He continued to flip through the book, though, taking careful note of its contents. Maomao, not sure she wanted him looking *too* closely, inadvertently slipped back into her skeptical gaze. Perhaps Gaoshun noticed, for he nudged Jinshi gently.

"If it's caught your interest, sir, why not keep one for yourself?" Maomao said.

"N-No! It hasn't caught my anything!" Jinshi said, all but throwing the book down. Maomao picked it up and smoothed it out to make sure the pages wouldn't crease. "No, indeed," Jinshi said, more confidently this time. "But

perhaps I can look the other way on this *one* occasion." He suddenly sounded rather self-important—but then, he *was* important, so maybe that was inevitable.

"Are you certain, sir?" Maomao asked, a gleam beginning to enter her eyes.

"Yes, but I wish for you to inform me what shop is selling such things."

Maomao's expression promptly changed to one of barely concealed amusement. Gaoshun nudged Jinshi again.

"What? I just want to know more about this exquisite printing," he said, sounding slightly flustered. This conversation was getting stranger by the minute.

"Certainly," Maomao said, still looking amused but jotting down the name of the shop in a notebook.

"It's the truth!"

"Of course, sir."

She didn't think Jinshi had to resort to illustrations; someone like him could surely see as much of the real thing as he wished. It wasn't possible that paper was sometimes preferable to reality, was it? Maomao, her thoughts threatening to run away with her, pondered the possibilities as she tore out the page of the notebook and gave it to him. As she did so, she couldn't help noticing the excellent quality of paper in the doctor's notebook, just what one might expect.

Joking aside, Maomao suspected Jinshi might have it in mind to start up a new business venture. The real trick of politics was figuring out how to extract taxes from the populace without unduly upsetting them. One way was to increase people's income, and the first step in doing so was to invest tax money.

Don't know exactly how he plans to go about it, Maomao thought, but the important thing to do now was to pick up the scattered books. Jinshi was attracting his customary audience, and while it might have been interesting to discover just how they would look at the gorgeous eunuch if they knew what kind of reading material he was perusing, Maomao wasn't a terrible enough person to give him away.

While Maomao was busy cleaning up, Gaoshun's hand brushed the box in which the delivery had arrived.

"What's wrong?" Maomao asked.

Gaoshun looked hesitant. “I was wondering whether any of them might require censorship...”

He was talking, of course, about the content of the materials. Several were rather, well, hard-core. His Majesty’s personal preference. And what a preference it was.

“I’m told that our most important reader found something lacking in the earlier material.”

“Absolutely not,” Gaoshun said. And after she’d wheedled the madam into handpicking the best stuff. She reluctantly handed him the most lurid of the material.

Some ten days or so later, Maomao was loafing around the laundry area.

“I wonder what’s buried down there,” Xiaolan said innocently, leaning against a wall with a laundry basket in her arms.

The weather was excellent today, so the laundry area was bustling. Eunuchs washed clothes as fast as water could be brought. The maids’ uniforms were laundered by being trodden underfoot in a harsh lye mixture, while the consorts’ clothing was worked by hand using a handmade soap.

“Search me,” Maomao said. She pulled out a baked treat wrapped in the skin of a bamboo shoot and handed it to Xiaolan, who took it with a grin.

The question about what was “buried down there” was, Maomao gathered, a line from a novel. Novels were all the rage in the rear palace these days.

“What do I seek beneath the bewitching blossoms?” Xiaolan inquired, her eyes sparkling. She was a country girl and couldn’t read; there must have been someone reading the story to her. “I wonfer whaf it could be,” she said around a mouthful of food. Her cheeks bulged like a squirrel’s.

“Maybe horse crap?” Maomao ventured, earning a snort from Xiaolan. The girl managed not to choke, but she glowered at Maomao, her eyes watering. Maomao brought some water from the water supply and helped Xiaolan drink it, rubbing her back.

“You shouldn’t eat so fast.”

“It was your fault!”

What Maomao had said wasn’t untrue, though. Growing good vegetables required more than just water. Feeble soil would bring forth feeble produce; that’s what fertilizer was for. Beautiful flowers were just the same: the more

beautiful they were, the more potent the fertilizer must have been. But a young girl smitten with a romantic story probably didn't want to have her attention drawn to such vulgar details. Maomao resolved to be more careful in the future.

It wasn't long before their turn came to do their laundry.

The novels Xiaolan was so taken with were making the rounds of the rear palace, and the Jade Pavilion was no exception. When Maomao got back, in fact, she discovered three young women chatting and giggling over a rough-hewn book.

"Hi, Maomao," said the calm, mild-mannered Guiyuan. The other two, Yinghua and Ailan, were too absorbed in the book to greet her. Guiyuan had the page between her fingers, and the women were tugging on her sleeve, urging her to hurry up and turn it. Maomao leaned down to look at the cover, which had an illustration of a tree with a profusion of blossoms and a figure standing beneath it. She surmised it was the same book Xiaolan had been talking about.

"You want to read it later, Maomao?" Guiyuan seemed to be a quick reader, quicker than the other two, and she had time for a little conversation.

"No, thanks. Why is everyone so excited about that book, anyway?" Maomao asked.

"It came from His Majesty. It's great, believe it or not."

His Majesty—so it had come from the Emperor himself. The surprising thing was that he knew about it at all; high society tended to look down on novels as not refined enough. They held that fact was more edifying than fiction.

"Apparently he gave them to all the consorts and told them to share them around when they were done reading them," Guiyuan said, although she looked a tad disappointed that Consort Gyokuyou wasn't the only one to receive this special gift.

"Well, well," Maomao said, looking more closely at the cover. She realized she recognized the mark on it. It was the seal belonging to the bookstore she'd referred Jinshi to the other day.

Ahh, now it makes sense. She finally grasped why he had been so interested in her por—er, her reference materials. When Jinshi had seen the quality of the paper, he had realized it would be suitable for a gift from the

Emperor. If the books had really been given to all the consorts, that meant at least a hundred had been printed. If they could make plates of the books, even more could be produced. Then, if they produced a popular edition on slightly less-expensive paper, they could realize even more profit. Maomao was starting to think she should have asked the printer for an intermediary's fee.

She was sure Jinshi must have planted the idea in the Emperor's head. *I should've known he was planning something.*

Fiction novels, easy to approach but unsophisticated, were being distributed to the consorts. Normally any gift from His Majesty would be cherished and treasured, but by giving books to all his ladies, each one would be less valuable. And anyway, the gift was nothing but pulp fiction. There would probably be a few disobedient consorts scandalized by the idea of even touching the thing.

On top of all this, there was the command to share the books with other people. Some of the consorts might hit on the idea of having their ladies-in-waiting read the book to them, instead of taking the trouble to read it themselves.

Hmmm...

The pieces were starting to come together; Maomao began to see what Jinshi was up to. The ladies-in-waiting who learned the story would share it with other women. Hence why even Xiaolan could quote from the book.

"Aw, are we done already?" Yinghua asked, looking as dejected as a dog who'd been denied a treat. The book was now closed, and Guiyuan and Ailan wore similar expressions. "More! I wanna read more!" Yinghua exclaimed with all the fervor of a deprived child. Amusements were few and far between in the rear palace, so that even a lone novel was a source of genuine excitement.

"According to Master Gaoshun, there's a new book being printed. When it's ready, he says we'll get a copy," Guiyuan said.

"Yeah, I know, but I can't wait that long!"

Guiyuan frowned at Yinghua. Yinghua, for her part, had her cheeks puffed out like a blowfish.

Ailan, meanwhile, had the book in her hands and was looking at it intently.

"Is everything all right?" Maomao asked.

"About this book..." Ailan started.

Hongniang, the chief lady-in-waiting, was looking after Princess Lingli while the three young ladies took their break. When their break time was over, they would switch, and Hongniang would have a chance to relax.

"We're the only ladies-in-waiting here, right? And Lady Gyokuyou was nice enough to say we could read this. Doesn't it feel like kind of a waste if we're the only ones who get to enjoy it?"

Maomao thought she understood what Ailan was getting at. When you find something interesting, you want to share it; that's human nature. Maomao, for example, had once discovered a very rare snake she'd never seen before, and had gone around showing it to everyone she could find. (They had not been pleased.) It was probably this same impulse that motivated Ailan to want to let more people read the book. The women of the Jade Pavilion had some connections outside their own workplace. But Yinghua put a stop to that idea.

"Wait," she said. "I don't think we should show it to any other palace women. We have to be careful with it."

"That's right, they might lose it," added Guiyuan.

"Yeah, I guess so," Ailan said wistfully.

Hmm. Maomao reached for the book. What she was about to suggest might not normally be acceptable, but considering what she thought Jinshi had in mind, she decided it would be all right this time.

"What if you didn't give them the actual book," she said, "but made a copy for them?"

Ladies lower in the hierarchy might not have the means, but Ailan was an attendant to a high consort and should be able to procure the paper, brush, and other implements necessary to copy a text. And if she didn't want to take the time or spend the money, well, she didn't have to.

"What?" Ailan said, caught completely off guard by Maomao's suggestion.

"I suppose replicating the illustrations would be difficult, but you have lovely handwriting, so I don't think copying the text would be any problem for you."

The producers of the book would no doubt have been better pleased if the women had bought another copy instead, but when that wasn't feasible, something such as this was the only solution. Though it might be asking too much for Ailan to illustrate the book herself, she could provide a perfectly

readable copy of the text, which was really all that was necessary.

"I see! That makes sense!" Ailan's eyes began to shine with a new light.

"Oof! Are you really gonna do all that work?"

"Yinghua, don't say that," Guiyuan reproved her.

Maomao set the book carefully in front of Ailan and resolved to get back to work. Their break time was almost over, anyway, so they all needed to hustle or Hongniang would fall upon them like a lightning bolt.

It was all a very roundabout way for Jinshi to get what he wanted, Maomao thought. With books—of whatever kind—circulating more freely in the rear palace, at least a few people would learn to read.

Back when Maomao had been serving Jinshi directly, she'd had a few opportunities to see some of the paperwork he dealt with in his own work. He'd asked for her opinion on one project—purely out of curiosity, of course. He had wondered how the literacy rate among the women of the rear palace might be improved.

Maomao was getting firsthand experience of how well Jinshi's plan was working. She was holding a twig in her hand, scratching the characters *Xiaolan* into the ground. Xiaolan herself watched intently, then tried to copy her.

Xiaolan always seemed like she was more interested in snacks than anything else in life; Maomao had been surprised when she'd first come to her and asked her to teach her to read and write. When Maomao asked why, Xiaolan said the woman who had been reading stories to her had stopped. The woman's voice had finally given out after being endlessly petitioned by the illiterate palace women to read to them. She was a good-hearted woman, though, and had agreed to make copies of the book if the others would make the effort to learn to read it themselves.

So there was someone else out there thinking along the same lines as Ailan. It was an awfully generous offer, considering the price of paper.

Maomao had suggested that she could read to Xiaolan, but the other woman had shaken her head. "She was nice enough to write it out for me, so I can't cheat like that."

Maomao mussed Xiaolan's hair fondly. She thought she was giving her a friendly pat, but she mostly succeeded in making it go every which way, earning herself an annoyed look from Xiaolan.

Thus, the time they usually devoted to gossiping was turned to learning to write. Xiaolan gripped her twig with a look of intense concentration. The character *xiao*, which consisted of just a few short strokes next to each other, still looked a bit like a pile of dead bugs to her, but it was simple enough and she could manage to recognize it. *Lan*, however, was a far more complicated character and was giving her a good deal of trouble.

Maomao wrote the character in the dirt again, nice and large. This time she broke it down by its three radicals to make it easier for Xiaolan to understand. On top, there were three simple strokes representing grass; beneath them, a character that by itself meant "gate," and inside the gate was the character for "east." Maomao started by having Xiaolan practice the pieces individually.

"I never knew my name was so hard..." Xiaolan received passing marks on her "grass" radical, barely, but her teacher insisted she redo the "gate" and "east" parts.

The fact was, Maomao wasn't sure what the characters for Xiaolan's name were. Xiaolan's own parents probably hadn't been literate. But she assumed it would be appropriate to use the most common characters for the name. When Maomao had been taught to read, she'd started with her own name. It was important, she was told, for helping you know where you came from—but then, she was often told she had all the charm of a stray cat.

"If you learn to write the characters, you'll obviously end up learning to read them, but would you rather focus on just reading for now?" Maomao asked, but Xiaolan shook her head.

"If we're going to take the time, I'd rather learn to write them. That can only help in the long run, right?"

That was true. The ability to read and write opened up many more job opportunities. Even in the rear palace, literate women were put to relevant work and treated better than the interchangeable laundry-hops. It was even said that an especially accomplished palace woman might find herself reassigned to administrative duties outside the rear palace.

"I'll have to find work for myself after I leave here. I'd better learn while I have the chance." So Xiaolan was trying to plan for the future, in her own way. She'd come to the rear palace about the same time as Maomao. Terms of service lasted two years, so she was already halfway through her contract. Given that she had been sold into service by her parents, it seemed unlikely

she could expect to go back home when her time was up.

"I see. We may need to make the lessons a little more intense, then," Maomao said, and then she started writing swiftly in the dust.

"Y-Yeah, thanks. So, uhh, what does this say?"

"It says: *dong chong xia cao*. Caterpillar fungus."

"Um, okay. And this?"

"*Mantuluo-hua*. Thornapple."

"And...this one?"

"*Gegen*. Kudzu root."

"Um... Do these words actually come up a lot?"

Maomao didn't say anything, just reluctantly rubbed away the vocabulary she'd written and replaced it with more ordinary terms.

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Chapter 2: The Cat

Princess Lingli, a year and a half on from her birth, was proving quite precocious, a very healthy child indeed. Maomao wasn't a big fan of children, but even she had to admit that the princess was endearing. It was certainly more pleasant taking care of her than looking after one of the girls who had been sold into the brothel. There's no creature in the world so insufferable as a preteen girl.

The princess had graduated from holding on to things in order to get around to walking on her own, and recently to jogging short distances. Consort Gyokuyou watched her pound around with a touch of concern. "I wonder if this residence is starting to get a little small for her," she said. The Jade Pavilion was hardly cramped, but it wasn't healthy for a child to play inside all the time. There was a central garden as well, but soon it wouldn't be enough to hold the princess's interest.

"Perhaps it might be all right to take her for a little walk." Gyokuyou was uncommonly open-minded. Most nobles felt that young ladies of prominent heritage should spend their days safely *indoors*, swaddled in the finest silks. Evidently, Consort Gyokuyou didn't agree. "What do you think, Maomao?"

Maomao looked up and grunted softly, somewhat surprised to have the consort suddenly ask for her opinion. "In terms of her health, I think it would be wonderful if she had more chances to go outside."

Maomao looked at Gyokuyou's feet. They were well-built and perfectly large enough; they hadn't been bound when she was young. In the arid western regions where she had been born and raised, Gyokuyou seemed to have received a somewhat more permissive upbringing than many of the other consorts.

Generally speaking, it was regarded as best to let a child's mother set the tone for their rearing, but this particular child happened to be the daughter of the most important man in the nation and the apple of his eye. They couldn't expect him to simply nod along and let Gyokuyou do whatever she wanted.

The consort, of course, understood this very well. "I'll ask about it, then,"

she said, running her fingers through Lingli's hair where the child had fallen asleep on the couch.

Several days later, permission had been granted for the princess to go outside, accompanied by two eunuchs as guards. Maomao and Hongniang were to go with her. It was just a little walk, but the Emperor could be pretty protective. Then again, all of his children had died young so far, so maybe he had reason to be.

"I know you know a lot about flowers and animals, Maomao. Maybe you could teach her?" Gyokuyou said, patting the princess's head. Her belly was already heavy, so she had to stay behind at the Jade Pavilion, just to be safe.

"Don't give her ideas, Lady Gyokuyou. She'll teach the princess the most positively awful things," Hongniang insisted, but the consort acted surprised.

"Goodness, I should think her instruction might be helpful." The hint of an elegant smile appeared on her face. "After all, one never knows where one might go in marriage in the future."

I knew she was a shrewd one, Maomao thought. The princess might still be young, but given her place in life, in another ten years or so there was every chance she would be married into another family somewhere. If she was granted to some loyal subject, well and good, but it was distinctly possible she would go to live in some other country—somewhere she might not be entirely welcome. In such a situation, a working knowledge of drugs and poisons couldn't go amiss.

Hongniang acceded with a sigh. Though obviously not thrilled, she understood the logic just as well as Maomao.

Gyokuyou waved to Princess Lingli as she left on her walk, and the princess waved back. Then she squealed, seeing the outside of the Jade Pavilion for the first time. She could only taste so much of the outside world from the pavilion courtyard. She still knew only a few words, and most of them didn't make very much sense, but nonetheless she was clearly excited to see so many palace women, far more than there were in her house. Maomao had worried the child might be afraid and start crying, but far from it. She had her mother's daring.

Lingli pattered along, exclaiming frequently. Sometimes she would point at something, and Maomao or Hongniang would tell her what it was called. It was hard to say how much she really understood, but she would burble "Mrm

mrm" in response, so maybe some of the words made sense to her. The eunuch guards kept a respectful distance, not too close but never too far. Young children were a rare sight in the rear palace—indeed, Lingli was the only one under ten in the entire complex—and she naturally attracted the women's attention. Some couldn't suppress a smile to see a child for the first time in so long; others, realizing she was a princess, took a respectful step back; and still others simply looked at her with no particular expression at all. The young princess was oblivious to all of this, but as she grew up, she would come to understand the significance of those looks.

Hongniang, who was holding Lingli's hand, had her work cut out for her as the princess flitted from one thing to the next, bursting with curiosity. The plan had been to walk to the cherry grove that lay west of the Jade Pavilion, pick some cherries, and then come home, but they seemed to keep finding detours and diversions. Finally they spotted the western gate, Hongniang openly relieved to have reached their destination.

They heard a high-pitched cry: "Rroww!" It sounded almost like an infant, so that Maomao and Hongniang briefly thought it was Lingli, but the princess was looking around for the source of the sound too. Suddenly she darted off. Hongniang scrambled after her as she peered between some storage buildings. "No, Princess, don't!" Hongniang called.

At the same moment there came another cry: "Mew!" Before Lingli could disappear among the buildings, Maomao squeezed herself between the storehouses with a "I'll go have a look."

"Maomao!" Hongniang said.

"Meow meow!" Lingli squealed at the same time. Hongniang had no choice but to step back, while Maomao continued after their charge.

She saw something glimmer golden in the gloom. She reached out toward it, but it slipped between her feet and ran off.

"Meow!"

"Princess!" Hongniang said, holding Lingli back. A small, grimy ball of fur appeared from between the buildings. The furball took fright at the sudden sight of humans and tried to run. Its hair stood on end and its tail stuck up.

"Meow!" The princess pointed at the fuzzball, indicating she wanted them to catch it. Maomao had just extricated herself from between the storehouses, but she wasn't in any position to jump on a small animal. *It's gonna get*

away, she thought, but at that moment someone appeared behind the ball of fur. The little creature was so focused on Maomao, Hongniang, and Lingli that the new arrival easily swept it up in her hands.

Their helper was another palace woman, someone Maomao didn't recognize. "Is this yours?" she asked, sounding surprisingly girlish. Although she was tall, she had a young face; she might have been Maomao's age, or perhaps younger. She wore the same uniform as Xiaolan and seemed a touch ditzy.

"Thank you," Maomao said. The other woman held the filthy, shivering lump of fuzz out to her. Maomao took out a handkerchief and wrapped it around the animal. She could feel it shaking even through the cloth, and it cried "Mrow!" pleadingly. It had run only out of fear and had exhausted itself doing so; she could feel how limp it was.

"I'll bet it's hungry," the woman said. "Maybe you can feed it. Anyway, see you!" Then she went on her way with a wave.

Whatever; Maomao had the furball, so she considered this a success. She took the animal over to the princess. Hongniang studied it. "Maomao, is that —?" She raised an eyebrow with a disapproving look. "Meow, meow!" the princess cooed, apparently meaning "Let me see!"

"It is indeed. A cat."

The tiny kitten curled in her handkerchief was still shivering.

Princess Lingli was entranced by the tiny, unfamiliar life-form. She continually badgered Maomao to show it to her, crying "Meow, meow!" in imitation of the kitten's mewling, but Maomao knew Hongniang would never let the princess touch the grimy little thing. They couldn't simply leave it to its own devices, though, so they cut their walk short and went back to the Jade Pavilion.

Notwithstanding the princess's attachment to the kitten, something so unsanitary couldn't be allowed in the consort's residence. Ultimately, they distracted the princess with her favorite snack while Maomao spirited the animal away to the medical office. It seemed like the obvious place, for without care, the creature was going to die.

Maomao was much perplexed, though. Yes, the warm season was when wild animals would be breeding, but that was a matter for the world outside the rear palace. Within its walls, there were hardly any pets to speak of. A

small handful of the consorts had birds from other lands, but they kept them in cages, and there weren't any dogs, cats, or anything else of the sort around. Special permission was required to keep a pet, and it was forbidden for male and female animals to be kept together; if and when they arrived, male animals were castrated just like male humans. It might sound harsh, but it was precisely to prevent any trouble should they escape. The rear palace couldn't have animals breeding willy-nilly all over its vast grounds.

They had come to a compromise: Hongniang agreed that the cat could stay for the time being, but she said the higher-ups had to be informed.

"Oh, this is a surprise," the quack doctor said. Calm as ever, he didn't seem to be thinking very hard about why Maomao had a cat with her. He saw that it was shivering, though, which provoked a compassionate frown. The doctor set some water on to boil. When it was good and warm, he put it in a wine bottle, wrapped the bottle in a cloth, and placed it in the basket where they had put the kitten.

"Looks like you know just what to do."

"Not the first cat I've taken in. I had the sweetest calico once."

By sheer coincidence, the kitten also happened to be a calico. As they wiped away the filth on its fur with a damp rag, they saw the patches of reddish-brown and black fur. The kitten had its milk teeth, but it was terribly undernourished; Maomao could feel its rib cage under her fingers.

"You wouldn't have any milk, would you?" she asked. Its mother's milk would be best, but they could hardly go out searching for her now. It hadn't looked to Maomao like there had been any other cats around when they'd found the kitten, anyway.

"Mmm, I think I can go get some," the quack said and darted out of the office. As the palace physician, he had a fair amount of pull in the kitchen.

As Maomao continued to rub the milk-starved kitten with the rag, she picked fleas off it, tossing them in oil to kill them. She would have liked to simply dip the animal in some hot water to get rid of them all at once, but considering the kitten's physical state, wiping it down was the most she could do.

A few minutes later, the doctor came trotting back with a stew pot. "They had goat's milk, at least." He held out the pot. Maomao dipped a finger into it and found it was exactly the right temperature. She made sure her fingertip was wet with milk, then brought it to the kitten's mouth. The tiny animal

began half-nibbling, half-lapping at her finger. She did this several times, the quack watching them both fondly.

"What a sweetie," he said.

Maomao hated to take advantage of him just because he was acting like an especially soft touch, but she decided to ask him for one more favor. "Would it be possible for you to obtain some tripe?" Given the number of people in the rear palace, the kitchen must slaughter several animals every day. Sausage was occasionally served at mealtimes, so Maomao knew they didn't simply throw the organs away.

"T-Tripe? Well, I suppose, but whatever for?"

The kitten was so weak that it seemed like it would be a while until it had recovered enough even to drink milk from a saucer. Feeding it one fingertip's worth at a time, though, was time-consuming. Maomao had thought she might be able to appropriate some intestines to simulate a parent's nipple.

When she explained this to the quack, he went rushing off again to the dining area. Truly, a generous-hearted man. In the meantime, Maomao continued to feed goat's milk to the small cat, as much as it would drink.

Several days later, they had mostly managed to clean the kitten up and its fur was starting to regain some of its luster. Maomao had briefly worried whether the goat's milk would sit well with it, but the kitten seemed to have taken it quite well.

Ordinarily, they would probably have had to toss the cat out of the rear palace immediately, but—for better or for worse—the night they found the animal, the Emperor had happened to visit the Jade Pavilion. When he heard his little princess incessantly exclaiming "Meow! Meow!" he couldn't deny her the source of her pleasure. And who should be charged with the animal's care but, of course, Maomao.

"Her name already means 'cat.' They're the perfect match!" the Emperor had joked. Maomao hadn't been quite sure whether she should laugh or not, but as Consort Gyokuyou chuckled, Maomao at least managed a polite smile. She figured eventually she would be able to foist the thing off on the doctor. (As if she hadn't mostly done that already.)

The princess couldn't yet enjoy the kitten's company because it still had some fleas, and more importantly, because however small it might have been, it was still a wild animal. Maomao promised to share the kitten with Lingli

when it got a little stronger.

When the kitten was recovered enough to tolerate it, Maomao dunked it in a washbasin and gave it a bath. It immediately looked substantially cleaner, but when she scrubbed it with some soap, the water turned gray. Its undercoat was still dirty. When Maomao suggested that the kitten's soft, white fur would make an excellent writing brush, the doctor clutched the animal protectively, shaking his head. She'd meant it as a joke, but as two brand-new brushes appeared for her shortly thereafter, she decided she had come out ahead.

After the kitten had enough time drinking nourishing milk, they added minced chicken to its diet. They gave it a small box full of sand, where it promptly learned to do its business. It still had trouble doing number two without having its anus stimulated, though. The quack was kind enough to use a damp rag to help the kitten out.

Its teeth were still small, but meanwhile they clipped and filed its nails. Not an easy procedure on a kitten, but if it accidentally scratched someone or something, they would never hear the end of it. *Seemed like a good idea at the time, anyway*, Maomao thought, letting out a long sigh. Just then, someone arrived at the medical office.

"And how's the little one doing?"

The source of the lighthearted quip was Jinshi. Gaoshun was with him as ever, and he was carrying some sort of bag.

"I think the princess should be able to see her soon," Maomao replied. "The only problem is, I don't have a plan yet for if the animal scratches her or tries to run away."

"Oh, you're always so caught up in details."

Easy for him to say. He wasn't the one who would suffer the consequences if anything went wrong.

Maomao glanced over toward the animal in question to discover Gaoshun had produced some dried fish from the bag and was waving it in front of the kitten. The customary furrow in his brow was gone, and he even appeared to be smiling. So he had a playful streak!

"Master Gaoshun, I think that might be a little hard for our kitten yet. Perhaps I could boil it?"

The quack already had a pot ready to go as if he had been waiting for this moment. You couldn't count on him to do his own job, but he came through

at times like this.

Jinshi snatched the cat up and stretched it out, examining its little belly. "Female?" he asked.

"Yes. No need to castrate it, fortunately." The words were out of Maomao's mouth before she realized that perhaps it wasn't something to say so lightly in this company. "I'm sorry, sir," she added.

"No, think nothing of it," Jinshi replied, though she couldn't quite read his expression. Still feeling apologetic, Maomao went in search of some kind of snack and came up with the last of the sausages they'd made from the leftover tripe. She'd packed them with meat and fragrant herbs and boiled them, not wanting anything to go to waste. Then she stopped for a second and thought about it.

"Something wrong?" Jinshi asked.

"No, sir." Maomao put the sausage back on the shelf and picked out some rice crackers instead. The doctor, meanwhile, had a distant look on his face as he ate.

Jinshi amused himself by playing with the cat. He dangled the ornament that normally hung at his hip in front of the kitten—and pretended not to notice Gaoshun watching him with deep concern. He did, though, notice Maomao looking at him; he turned to her and held out the ornament as if to ask whether she wanted to play with the kitten too.

"I'm not much of a cat person," she said.

"With your name?" He wasn't the first person to say that.

"*You* seem to quite like her, Master Jinshi."

"Not particularly." He looked at Gaoshun, who was working with the doctor to boil the dried fish. *Two middle-aged men putting themselves out for a kitten*, Maomao thought.

"I'm not sure what's supposed to be so good about them," Jinshi went on. He was still eyeing the two men, who were gradually beginning to sound like they were purring themselves as they cooed over the kitten. Frankly, it was disgusting. His look seemed to say he could never be like *them*.

"I agree with you," Maomao said, looking at the kitten. "But according to the cat lovers I know, the fact that you can never tell what they're thinking is part of the appeal."

"Goodness."

"You look at them long enough, and you discover you can't look away."

“Hmm!”

“Then, gradually, you find yourself eager to pet the cat.”

“I see, I see.”

“It may annoy you that they act affectionate only when you have food, remaining aloof at all other times.”

“W-Well, yes.”

“But when you’re in that deep, all you can really do is forgive them their foibles.”

Finally, Jinshi didn’t respond at all.

Over time, Maomao was given to understand, one came to want to kiss the cat (even though it wouldn’t like it), then to play with its cute little toe beans, and finally to touch that fuzzy, wuzzy belly (even knowing a good scratching was the inevitable result). Maomao saw it as positively unsanitary to do such things with an animal that went around who knew where doing who knew what, but cat lovers apparently couldn’t help themselves. She looked at Jinshi, full of disdain for all this, to discover the kitten on his face.

“Whatever are you doing, Master Jinshi?” If he wanted to touch the cat’s fuzzy, wuzzy belly, fine, but Maomao glanced out the window, worried what might happen if someone were to see him that way.

“Oh, nothing,” Jinshi said. “But I feel like maybe I have more sympathy for those cat people than I did before.” He sounded as if he’d come to some sort of deep realization. (Let us prescind from the question of exactly what he had realized.)

“I see. Well, it appears the fish is ready.”

“Er, yes, of course.” Realizing that Gaoshun and the doctor were looking in his direction, Jinshi quickly put the cat down.

“What were you doing, sir?” Gaoshun asked, his tone polite but his gaze sincerely jealous.

Ultimately, even Jinshi was at a loss as to where exactly the kitten had come from. Plenty of wagons came and went in the rear palace, though, loaded with provisions. The simplest inference was that the kitten had wandered in after one of them, lured by the scent of food, and had gone unnoticed until the princess found her.

Not long after, the kitten was awarded an official court rank by the Emperor, being granted the illustrious-sounding title Admonisher of Thieves.

All that really meant was that she would help keep the medical office free of mice. The Emperor certainly had a soft spot for his daughter.

The cat was given a name that meant “furry.” It stuck in Maomao’s craw for one simple reason: this name, too, was pronounced “maomao.”

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Chapter 3: The Caravan

The season was turning, bringing an unpleasant heat and humidity. Maomao reflected on how quickly time passed as she gathered up fragrant herbs to use to ward off the bugs.

"I think it's time to change the wardrobe over," Hongniang, Consort Gyokuyou's chief lady-in-waiting, said, and if she thought it was time, then it was time. Thus the ladies-in-waiting found themselves laboring away among the clothing.

"So many dowdy old fashions!" Yinghua huffed, standing in front of a dresser. She, Maomao, and Ailan were handling this job while Guiyuan looked after the young princess. "Ailan, grab that thing on the topmost shelf for me!" Yinghua instructed, craning her neck to look up at the shelf. Ailan was the tallest of them, a fact she was self-conscious about but which was quite convenient for reaching things in high places. After she had dragged a trunk down from the top of the shelf, the (rather shorter) Maomao and Yinghua inspected the contents. They sorted the clothing into different categories and put them on poles to air out in the shade.

"Hmm. I guess this one wouldn't be *too* embarrassing," Yinghua said. She was sorting the clothes into those in which one could still be caught dead and those in which one could not. To Maomao, all the outfits looked equally sumptuous, but Yinghua was accustomed to the finer things and proved more discriminating. "This sort of thing used to be really popular once. But it's better to avoid fads. Once they go, you're left with stuff you can't use."

Maomao took the outfits deemed no longer viable and stuffed them back into the chest, then trundled into the hallway with it. These garments may have been old or outdated, but they had still belonged to one of the upper consorts. They were made of the finest material, and would be reworked or repaired and then gifted to other people. Not to the ladies-in-waiting of the Jade Pavilion personally, but rather to their families. Ladies-in-waiting sometimes received hair sticks or other accessories, but clothing like this was not something one could get away with parading around the rear palace in.

The craftsmen would rework the outfits, and in their new forms they would be distributed in Gyokuyou's hometown.

Pulling down another box, Ailan said, "You know, I heard new ladies-in-waiting will be coming before long," as if the thought had just occurred to her. "With Lady Gyokuyou pregnant, we'll need more hands around here, but it would attract attention if we were the only place to get new women. So instead they're going to give all the consorts a chance to expand their retinues."

Yinghua's mouth hung open slightly at that. "What, all of a sudden? I mean, I'm happy to hear that, but..."

"They found a good reason," Ailan said. "Think about it. When one consort shows up with more than fifty attendants, how are the other women supposed to feel?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean," Yinghua said, her face darkening briefly.

Maomao, too, understood what Ailan was talking about. Or rather, whom: Consort Loulan, who had entered the rear palace with tremendous fanfare. For the Emperor's favorite consort, by contrast, to have a measly five women simply didn't look good.

"Did she even try to make do with fewer women?" said Yinghua.

"Watch it, Yinghua, or you'll get another taste of Hongniang's iron hammer," Ailan responded. Yinghua promptly clapped her hands over her mouth. Maomao, meanwhile, concentrated single-mindedly on putting the unwanted clothes in chests and carrying them out. In this way they carried on, chatting and working, until they had discarded almost half the summer clothes.

"We did get rid of a lot," Maomao said, puzzled, "but how will we manage now?"

"Not to worry," Ailan said with a smile. "We've already commissioned a few new sets of clothes from the craftsman."

"And a caravan will be coming soon. We can buy more then," Yinghua added. Ailan gave her a reproachful look for stealing her thunder.

"A caravan?" Maomao said.

"Yeah, that's right," Yinghua replied, brushing her hand along one outfit to check the feel of the silk. "It's supposed to be even bigger than usual this time." The excitement was evident in her voice. Perhaps the thought of it was what made her hand stop moving.

Caravans had once been groups of merchants who crossed the desert together, but the word had come to refer to any traveling sellers who visited, willing to engage in trade. Sometimes they did bring unusual items from strange lands, so the word wasn't entirely inaccurate, but still it didn't quite feel right.

The last caravan had visited during the time when Maomao had been effectively exiled from the rear palace, and the time before that, she had been a mere maid, unable to involve herself with such festivities. She had dealt with merchants in the pleasure district, so they didn't hold any particular fascination for her, but the idea was understandably exciting in the rear palace, where distractions were few and far between.

"You should go have a look, Maomao. We'll make sure you have some time in your schedule. Lady Gyokuyou usually gives us a little pocket money for things like this." Yinghua grinned.

It happened just as the smile was crossing her face: Maomao and Ailan froze. Yinghua looked at them, confused, and they both pointed behind her.

Yinghua turned around slowly to find Hongniang hovering over her like a storm cloud. The chief lady-in-waiting wore a tight, crooked smile. Yinghua almost choked, but managed a feeble grin.

"I hear a lot of talking, but I don't see a lot of sorting," Hongniang said.

"Er— Wh-What?!"

Maomao and Ailan, for their part, promptly set about folding clothes. Yinghua's mouth opened in an expression of betrayal.

I do want that pocket change, Maomao thought.

The incident, allegedly, cost Yinghua a bit of her spending money.

The rear palace was a big place, bigger than some towns. The women who worked there existed purely to serve the consorts, to keep up the buildings, and to hope for the vanishingly small chance that the Emperor might choose them for a bedmate. The unique situation bred rhythms and rituals of daily life that were likewise different from what one would find in an average city. As the roles of the palace women were broken down into cleaning, laundry, and cooking, it might be best to think of the place not as a city unto itself, but like a single giant household in which they all lived.

Yet in this whole huge place, it was impossible to find one particular thing that might have been expected. What was it? A shop of any kind.

“It looks like so much fun!”

Maomao met Xiaolan’s remark with a question. “You think so?” Xiaolan still seemed like a girl in some ways.

Palace women walked gaily among the tents set up in the plaza. The tents were packed close together, and, with nearly two thousand women serving in the rear palace, there was no room for the lower-ranking maids to squeeze in for a look. Unable to even admire the merchandise, the most they could do was to live vicariously by watching the *other* ladies admire it.

Maomao and Xiaolan were leaning against the railing of the room where the maids slept. Since the consorts and their ladies-in-waiting were all out having fun today, the minions had virtually nothing to occupy their time.

“Lucky them... I wish I could get some new clothes,” Xiaolan sighed, resting her chin on the railing.

“But you don’t have anywhere to wear them.”

“I know that. But I still want them!”

The lowest ranking of the palace women were generally only given work uniforms (three in the summer, two in the winter) and new outfits were provided only when an old one had worn out. Other necessaries, including hairbands and underwear, were likewise provided. Meals were served in the dining hall each day.

The families of the better-bred palace women might send gifts along with their letters, while the ladies-in-waiting of a consort might be given clothing or accessories by their mistress, not to mention snacks. Gyokuyou, for example, had granted Ailan paper on which to make her copies of the book.

With no shops around, none of these things were easy to come by. For Xiaolan, who had no powerful backer—no backer of any kind, in fact—chances to acquire new personal possessions were rare, and when they came, they went, well, like this. Only after the other ladies had been through the wares would she have a chance to pick through the leftovers for whatever she could afford with the paltry savings in her purse.

It was a strange feeling to see these shops all lined up here in the rear palace. The excitement in the air was palpable.

And only our quack to serve the whole lot, Maomao thought.

One might assume that any illness in a place this large would spread like wildfire, but in practice that wasn’t true. Sanitation in the rear palace was excellent. The palace women spent much of their time cleaning, and waste

was dealt with efficiently. When enough of it had built up, it was flushed into the sewers, whence it went, not to the moat, but out to a great river. The moat was thus kept free of filth and stench.

The former emperor had utilized this site because there was already an existing sewer here, a technology that had apparently come from the west. Talk had it that the rear palace had once been an actual city, refashioned to serve its current purpose. Both the walls and moat had belonged to that city, so that despite its size, building the rear palace had actually been fairly economical. It was perhaps not surprising to hear that the prime mover behind the project had been the haughty but effective empress regnant.

Such sanitation measures alone went a long way in preventing the outbreak of illness, although if anyone did get especially sick, she was sent back home to her family. So the little world of the rear palace went round, with or without a quack for a doctor.

"Maomao, I think I can get a little time off on the last day," Xiaolan said. Her eyes were sparkling—apparently this was an invitation to check out the shopping with her. Maomao had to admit she was pleased to be asked. She answered Xiaolan with a pat on the head.

When she got back to the Jade Pavilion, Maomao was greeted by the sight of some tired but satisfied ladies-in-waiting. While she had been out slacking —er, "having virtually nothing to do"—some merchants had come to the pavilion. The highest-ranking ladies of the rear palace didn't have to trouble themselves to go out to the shops; the shops came to them.

The merchants were all women—for how else were they to be admitted to the rear palace? Nonetheless, there were more eunuch bodyguards than usual around, just in case anything should happen. They were familiar men, though, and the girls were sipping some tea, the pavilion's domestic atmosphere undisturbed by the presence of the additional guards.

"His Majesty said Lady Gyokuyou could choose anything she liked!" Yinghua sounded as pleased as if she herself had been the one to receive this dispensation. She'd been terribly disappointed to have her spending money cut in half, but she seemed to have bounced back.

On the table was a stunning jade necklace the same color as Gyokuyou's eyes. There was also quartz glass and an accessory box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Princess Lingli was thoroughly satisfied with a pretty silk ball she'd

gotten, and in addition to clothes for the consort, a tiny robe for Lingli hung on the wall.

"Perhaps we've had a little *too* much excitement," Gyokuyou said with a touch of concern.

"If anything, ma'am, I think you could have stood to buy more," her chief lady-in-waiting, Hongniang, said somewhat emphatically. "I'm sure the other ladies all did."

Hongniang chose a restrained way of expressing herself, but Maomao could easily imagine what she meant. Lihua's ladies at the Crystal Pavilion, all talk and no work, had no doubt gorged themselves on shopping. Consort Lihua had plenty to spend, and presumably plenty was indeed spent.

Over at the Diamond Pavilion, Consort Lishu's ladies-in-waiting had, one might guess, goaded their lady into purchasing things *they* wanted. The best one could hope for was that they hadn't outright embezzled anything.

As for the Garnet Pavilion...well, Consort Loulan's penchant for conspicuous clothing consumption spoke for itself.

Consort Gyokuyou, who, by contrast, had purchased hardly enough to fill a single room, seemed downright frugal to Maomao, especially for someone with the Emperor's personal affection.

The consorts each drew a salary commensurate with their "jobs," but they were also reimbursed for clothing and accessories, which were considered necessary expenses. The upper, middle, and lower consorts came to almost a hundred people altogether, and Maomao found herself wondering if the national treasury was going to hold out at this rate. That was something she didn't need to worry about, though.

"In any case, others will come tomorrow, so I'm going to put away today's purchases." Hongniang started pulling outfits down off the wall, handing them off to Maomao. Each was richly colored and pleasant to the touch.

It was then that Maomao noticed these clothes were of a slightly different make than the ones Gyokuyou normally preferred. *Hm?* The consort usually liked to pair a sleeveless dress with a long skirt and then wear an overgarment with wide sleeves on top of it, but these dresses all had proper sleeves, accompanied by skirts that were to be tied with a sash just under the chest.

Maomao had a good guess at the reason. Consort Gyokuyou would

shortly be finding sashes difficult to tie across her midriff.

"Was this the only type of thing they had?" Maomao asked.

"What?" Hongniang replied. "The merchants swore they were all the rage."

So these were *all they had.* The ladies-in-waiting looked at each other questioningly. The women of the Jade Pavilion had done their shopping with only thoughts of Gyokuyou in their minds. But one would normally have expected a wider selection. And if one followed that fact to the assumption the merchants had been making...

No, Maomao must have been overthinking it.

At least, I hope I am.

Because if they had deliberately brought only this type of clothing to Consort Gyokuyou, it might suggest they had been trying to sound her out.

"I think tomorrow, you should ask them if they don't have some outfits with lower sashes," Maomao said. She thought perhaps it wasn't her place, but Gyokuyou and Hongniang both seemed to take her meaning. The other three ladies-in-waiting looked at each other again, but Maomao's insinuation had clearly gone over their heads.

"That's a good idea. We should get a little more variety," Gyokuyou said, setting some clothes on top of a box. Perhaps it was her imagination—but Maomao thought she saw a keen light flash through the lady's eyes.

The caravan would stay for five days, during which the ladies of the rear palace would have an unaccustomed chance to enjoy some shopping. The highest-ranking consorts had no need to go out to the shops, so it was first the middle- and lower-ranking consorts and their ladies-in-waiting who circulated among the merchant tents, followed by the women in administrative positions, each whittling down the selection further as they bought whatever caught their eye. Only on the last day did the women of the lowest ranks have an opportunity to sift through whatever was left. The fact that even that seemed to be an exciting prospect spoke to how few diversions there were around here.

This caravan had come across the desert and carried many unusual wares from exotic lands. It must have passed through Gyokuyou's homeland as well, for the women of the Jade Pavilion looked noticeably homesick as they studied the handicrafts.

Maomao was far more interested in any medicines or drugs that might be available, but such were understandably barred from being brought directly into the rear palace; tea leaves and spices, sold almost as an afterthought, were as close as the merchants came.

On the final day, Maomao, with a bit of spending money from Consort Gyokuyou, went to the market with Xiaolan just as she had promised.

"Wow, I can't believe it!" Xiaolan hardly had a coin to her name and couldn't afford anything on display, but that didn't stop her eyes from sparkling at an array of western glasswork. Maomao found Xiaolan's lack of affectation charming.

"This one, please." Maomao picked out an especially attractive hairband and gently tied it in Xiaolan's hair. The deep, peach-pink color suited her energy perfectly. It only took Xiaolan a second to notice something had happened, and then she was almost knocking Maomao over hugging her. Maomao wondered if this was what it would be like to have a little sister.

"You aren't going to buy any clothes, Maomao?" Xiaolan asked.

"Don't need any."

Partly, she didn't want to make a show of buying things in front of Xiaolan—but more importantly, she really wasn't interested in clothes. She was far more attracted to the tea and spices. Xiaolan, almost giddy over her new hairband, was more than happy to accompany Maomao to the shops that most interested her. She had a gigantic smile on her face the entire time. Apparently it was just that much fun for her to window-shop at these crude carts-turned-market-stalls.

Maomao was determined to buy some of the tea and spices. The ladies of the Jade Pavilion had taken it in turns to come to the market over the final three days of the caravan's visit, and Maomao had said she was content to go on the last day. This was the reason.

Last day means discounts.

Maomao wasn't interested in gems, trendy clothing, or any of that stuff. The goods she was after were of small consequence to everyone else, so she was sure there would be plenty left over. Besides, this was the rear palace—a special place. A bit of good-natured ripping-off was to be expected.

If they think they're going to take me for a ride, though...

Maomao's wiles were sharp. She'd spent most of her life watching the old madam do business, after all.

She stopped at one of the shops selling tea. A quartz goldfish bowl was filled with pretty little buds tied into balls. Jasmine tea. When steeped in hot water, the buds would open, as pleasant to see as they were to smell as the tea released its lovely aroma. Sadly, it had mostly been bought up; there were only three buds left.

"I'll take this," Maomao said.

But at the exact same moment, another voice said, "This one, please!" Maomao looked over to discover someone pointing at the same bowl. It was a palace woman about half a head taller than Maomao, although in spite of her height she still looked and sounded quite young. The contrast left Maomao blinking. She couldn't shake the sense that she'd seen the girl somewhere before.

The other girl looked almost as confused as Maomao—then she exclaimed, "Oh!" her eyes lighting up.

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“How’s your kitty cat?” she asked.

That jogged Maomao’s memory. This was the girl who had helped catch the kitten since dubbed Admonisher of Thieves. Maomao still didn’t know her name.

“She’s well. She lives at the medical office for the time being.”

The other girl grinned widely. She seemed to have a rich range of expressions, all highly communicative.

“Oh! Shisui! You were able to get time off?” Xiaolan said, bouncing into the conversation between the two of them. These two must have already known each other. Come to think of it, Shisui was wearing the same uniform as Xiaolan, that of the *shangfu*, or Wardrobe Service. She must have gone to the laundry area pretty often; it was only through happenstance that Maomao hadn’t run into her before.

“Yeah, they owe me at least this much!”

“You’ve got that right,” Xiaolan said. It was an innocent, friendly conversation.

Maomao noticed the tea-seller looking at them. She went ahead and bought all three of the remaining bulbs of jasmine tea and asked for them to be packed separately. The woman wasn’t thrilled about that, but when Maomao asked for one of the other leftover teas as well, she came around.

Then Maomao distributed the packages, one to Xiaolan and one to Shisui, keeping the last for herself. “Maybe we should take our chat somewhere else so we don’t get in the way,” she suggested, and pointed toward the medical building.

At the medical office, the quack doctor was gazing out at the marketplace enviously. As ever, he seemed to have a lot of time on his hands. The nature of his work kept him from leaving his office, even if hardly anyone ever showed up there. It must have been rough on him. He passed the time by helping the kitten groom herself. He was a very personable man, though, and when visitors did come, he bent over backwards to be hospitable to them.

“Gracious, young lady, I had no idea you had friends.” Not exactly a tactful thing to say, but then again, not untrue either.

Xiaolan entered the doctor’s office only with some trepidation, but her eyes lit up when she heard the cat say, “Meeoww.” Shisui likewise had a gleam in her eye.

“Aww, she’s adorable,” Shisui said. “What’s her name?”

There was a long beat. Finally Maomao replied, “Admonisher of Thieves.”

“Huh? What kind of weird name is that?”

“Just call her ‘the kitten,’ then.”

Yes, *the kitten*—that was plenty. Calling her “Maomao” was far weirder than the name the Emperor had given her.

Xiaolan and Shisui rarely visited the medical office; for one thing, they were normally too busy with work. Today, though, there was a festival atmosphere and everyone was having a good time. As a precaution, the storehouse containing the most important medicines had been locked up. True, it was arguably problematic that Maomao, who wasn’t technically on the staff, knew where the key was, but if she told anyone, they would only hide it from her, and she didn’t want that.

Maomao heated water while the quack prepared treats. She decided to use a quartz vessel instead of a teapot today. It was really for making medicine, not drinks, but when you had a high-quality tea like jasmine on hand, ceramic seemed like a waste. She used tepid water to warm the chilly vessel, then emptied it before placing a round bulb inside and pouring near-boiling water over it.

“Oh, wow!” The girlish cry came from Xiaolan, who was impressed by the potent aroma that drifted from the opening bulb. “Maomao, is this that stuff you bought earlier?”

Maomao nodded. Shisui, for her part, was conspicuous by her silence; maybe she’d seen jasmine tea before.

“You don’t want the water to be boiling, just relatively warm,” Maomao said. “Not that I have many chances to make it.” The tea leaves would probably keep for a little while if necessary.

The doctor appeared, solicitously offering rice crackers and mooncakes. The cakes were a bit large, so he cut them into pieces with a simple cleaver. Xiaolan’s eyes were already shining as she tried to judge which slice was the biggest. Only moments ago, she’d seemed unsure whether it was even acceptable for her to come into the doctor’s office. Now she was already chatting amiably with the quack. Maybe it was her youth that made her so adaptable. Shisui was also talking comfortably with him. The quack was clearly quite pleased. Many of the women in the rear palace treated men like

him rather coolly because he was a eunuch, so meeting someone like Xiaolan must have been a relief.

"I do feel I should remind you young ladies that this isn't a playhouse. This is just for this one time, okay?" He repeated himself on this point several times; it seemed to be his roundabout way of telling them that, in fact, they were quite welcome to come again (he could hardly say it in so many words).

"Is it like this every time? It's like one giant party out there," Shisui said, taking a bite of mooncake. It reminded Maomao that the other woman was the newest palace woman among them. Consort Loulan's arrival had brought a great many of them into the rear palace. Shisui had probably been there for less than six months.

"Kind of. It seems to be going on longer than usual, though." Xiaolan, the kitten on her knees, stuffed mooncake into her mouth. The kitten was getting a little too interested in her crumbs, so Maomao snatched her up and gave her some fish.

"Ahem, yes," the doctor said, clearing his throat importantly and brushing some crumbs from his loach-like mustache. "A special embassy from another land will be visiting us soon, you see."

Is he supposed to be telling us that? Maomao wondered as she sipped her tea. She'd been eager to get her hands on some hot water, but she was starting to think it might have been a mistake to bring the other two girls to the medical office.

"Wow, so someone really important will be coming," Xiaolan said. Her eyes were shining once more, but Maomao slipped another piece of mooncake onto the dish and Xiaolan's attention promptly switched to the new snack. Maomao racked her brain for some other topic of discussion, but it was Shisui who saved the day.

"Hey, there's been a weird smell coming from the northern quarter recently. Do you know anything about it?"

"A weird smell, you say? Well, that area isn't well looked-after. Maybe the sewer's backed up or something," the quack said. A blockage in the sewage tunnels could certainly create an odor that would be detectable above ground.

"I haven't noticed! I never go to the northern quarter," Xiaolan, making progress on her second helping of mooncake, said. "Do you have work there sometimes?"

“Hehe. The grass just so happens to be especially thick in that area.” Shisui grinned and took a bunch of paper from the folds of her robe. They looked like wrapping papers for snacks, but they were covered in ink drawings. Maomao looked at them with interest, but Xiaolan and the doctor recoiled—for the pictures were detailed depictions of insects. A fine-point brush had been used so that even the most subtle features were captured, and the name of each insect was inscribed carefully in the upper-right corner of each image.

“That’s great work,” Maomao said, and she meant it. There were no extraneous lines; the pictures looked fit for an encyclopedia. There were even careful depictions of the hind legs.

“Thanks. One of the best things about this place is all the different bugs. I get lots of chances to draw them,” Shisui said, pleased to have found someone who understood her. Xiaolan and the quack, meanwhile, were trying hard not to look at the all-too-realistic depictions.

Insects were another thing that could be used as medicinal ingredients. They didn’t put too much emphasis on that back in the pleasure district—it tended to upset the ladies—but many insect-based remedies were quite effective. Praying mantis oothecae were an excellent vigor enhancer, while earthworms had antipyretic properties.

“The fruit orchards to the south are too well-tended to have many bugs, but there’s lots in the northern quarter. It’s very desolate. You know, in a good way. There’s lots of big spiders there.”

“Spiders?!”

Maomao had heard that spider’s silk could help stop bleeding, but collecting the stuff was enough trouble that she hadn’t had a chance to try it yet. Shisui’s comment lit a fire in Maomao’s eyes.

“You want to see? I can take you there.”

“I want to see! Take me there!”

Maomao and Shisui were weirdly in sync. Xiaolan and the doctor observed their conversation with detachment. The kitten, her tummy full, raised one of her hind legs and scratched behind her ears.

Chapter 4: Perfume Oil

The caravan left a tremendous vogue for perfumed oil in its wake. Every palace woman who passed by seemed to carry a different scent. Each smell individually might have been quite pleasant, but they mingled together into an undifferentiated olfactory morass. Maomao, with her keen sense of smell, found it a little trying. What made it worse was that the imported perfume from the west wasn't subtle, but carried powerful scents.

Maomao wasn't the only one who found life a little harder because of the new trend. When she went to the laundry area, she discovered piles and piles of perfume-soaked clothing, the eunuchs responsible for cleaning it frowning deeply as they fetched bucket after bucket of water.

Such vogues tended to go as suddenly as they came. The craze for manicures had waned, so everyone needed something new to grab onto. Interest in novels continued to flourish, perhaps because books and perfume were completely different from each other.

Xiaolan was every bit as annoyed as Maomao by the perfume, since it meant more work for her, but she continued to study industriously in order to read her fresh, new copy of the novel. Maomao, who had admittedly expected Xiaolan's efforts to trail off after a few days, was impressed.

"Gah, it stinks," Maomao grumbled to herself as she set down a basket of laundry. Just being here threatened to make her feel drunk on the odors. She stood lethargically—but apparently she was in the way, because a serving girl with a basket full of clothing bumped right into her. Maomao ended up wearing some of the laundry.

"I'm so sorry!" said the maid, whose voice was still high.

Whomever the laundry belonged to, she was apparently also a disciple of the newest trend, for the clothes reeked of roses.

Roses, huh. Was it wrong of Maomao to think about how much money she might get for the rose water she'd made the other day? She'd made plenty of it but hadn't used any for the time being, just held on to it, for essence of rose could have a negative impact on pregnancy. It would probably be fine so

long as Consort Gyokuyou didn't use whole heaps of it, but one never knew, and it was best to be careful. As such, Maomao had been looking for an opportunity to sell the stuff in the pleasure district before it went bad.

She plucked the clothing off her head with a growl. Then she blinked and gave the outfit a good sniff. That alarmed the maid, but Maomao ignored her, tossing the outfit into the laundry basket and shoving her face into another one. Now nearby eunuchs and other serving women were watching her in amazement, but what did she care?

Maomao went from one basket to the next, smelling the contents, and by the time she was done it had completely slipped her mind to take her own washing back home. Instead, she headed off somewhere.

Maomao of all people knew where trends were most likely to take root.

That day, the shouting of the ladies-in-waiting of the Crystal Pavilion could be heard all over the rear palace.

The gorgeous eunuch appeared at the Jade Pavilion that evening. She'd figured he might. In his hand he held what appeared to be a written protest.

"I took you for someone with a little more restraint," Jinshi said, his customary exasperation now tinged with anger. Behind him stood Gaoshun (exasperation coupled with exhaustion), Consort Gyokuyou (worried but undeniably intrigued), and Hongniang (only just managing not to look like a wrathful deity). The other ladies-in-waiting were asleep with Princess Lingli, who had already gone beddie-bye.

I mean, I am, Maomao thought, but it was too late.

A great deal of proof was required in order to turn speculation into certainty. The Crystal Pavilion had been the perfect place to get it, and Maomao had, one might say, succumbed to her curiosity.

"My apologies. I let the excitement get away with me and did it without getting their permission."

"You sound like some old lech making excuses for himself."

That was the last thing Maomao wanted to hear from a certified actual lech, but for the time being she kept her eyes on the ground and tried to look penitent. "Next time I'll be sure to ask before I go smelling things."

"But *why* were you smelling them?!" Jinshi sounded distraught.

"Goodness," Gyokuyou said, blinking; this seemed to alert Jinshi to how

he was coming across, because his stern look softened somewhat and he regained a measure of his usual gentleness.

Anyway, Maomao had learned her lesson. Specifically, she had learned that she was going to need to check with people before she grabbed their clothes and started sniffing. She'd learned not to let her excitement cause her to practically tear the garments off people so she could smell them. And she'd *definitely* learned not to choose the ladies-in-waiting of the Crystal Pavilion as the subjects of her sniffing. They'd already treated her like a demon or an evil spirit, but now they seemed to regard her as something even worse.

Even knowing that might happen, Maomao had needed to be sure.

I think that's about enough penitence for now, she decided. She raised her head and looked Jinshi square in the eye. In her mind, it was actually a good thing that the complaint had brought Jinshi here so quickly. She believed this matter required an immediate decision.

"I had a reason for what I did."

She continued to stare at Jinshi for several seconds. Finally he opened his mouth, though he kept his face blank. "It had better be a good one."

"But of course," Maomao said firmly. Then she glanced at Gyokuyou and Hongniang and asked for some paper. Some promptly appeared. It was from Gyokuyou's personal store; frankly, it was nicer than Maomao needed right now. *A piece of old scrap paper would have been fine*, she thought, but she was the only one there who came from poverty and thus the only one to have such an idea. She began to write in quick, flowing characters, while the others surrounded the desk and watched.

Consort Gyokuyou read aloud: "Rose, benzoin, parasol tree, frankincense, and cinnamon? These are...all kinds of perfume or some such, right?"

Maomao nodded. "These are the aromas and essences I detected on the palace women today."

"What about them?" Jinshi asked, sticking his hands in his sleeves.

"None of them were present in any significant quantity," Maomao said, setting her brush against the ink stone, "but all are potentially harmful to a pregnancy." That cast a pall over her audience.

She went on: "In addition to the various perfume oils, the caravan was selling spices and teas." She produced the ones she had purchased for herself. The jasmine tea, along with peppers, moderately expensive black pepper,

rock salt, and cinnamon—which could easily serve in both food and perfume. All very much in-character for Maomao with her preference for dry, spicy foods. She was a little chagrined by how much she'd bought, but, well, the money had been there. She told herself she should have noticed then and there, but Maomao, it turned out, was not immune to the festive atmosphere.

"Jasmine tea has the potential to induce contractions," she said. "I don't think a small amount should be anything to worry about, but to avoid any possibility of a miscarriage, I think you should abstain from it entirely."

It was the very tea Maomao, Xiaolan, and the others had drunk at the medical office the other day.

"And then these spices. Peppers frequently appear in the abortifacients used by prostitutes."

Maomao glanced at Gyokuyou. She clearly understood that this matter was a serious one; she looked at Maomao intently and nodded. "Go on." Hongniang seemed eager that Gyokuyou not be exposed to too much distressing talk, but she respected the consort's opinion enough not to intervene.

"So using these ingredients will increase the chance of a miscarriage?" Jinshi asked.

Maomao was noncommittal. He was both right and wrong. "Each of them increases the possibility, but none of them is guaranteed to cause one. Presuming you don't accidentally drink the perfume oil or otherwise come in contact with an exceptionally large dose."

In ordinary quantities, all of the ingredients could practically be called safe; otherwise they couldn't be brought into the rear palace at all. But any given thing had multiple uses. If the ingredients were to be found around the Jade Pavilion, and by some mistake someone were to ingest them, who knew what might happen? What if that person was a pregnant consort? Maomao rued her failure to notice sooner.

"Can you get any kind of information on the merchants who were here with the caravan?" she asked.

"We can look into it, but I don't expect detailed lists of their wares."

Perfumes would simply be listed as perfumes, spices as spices, and tea as tea. Specific types and varieties were unlikely to be recorded. All the incoming merchandise had been inspected, however, giving everyone involved the sense that their job had been done to satisfaction and leaving

little room for complaint.

One more thing nagged at Maomao. “Doesn’t this remind you of...you know?”

“Remind me of what?” Jinshi replied, unsure what her vague remark was getting at.

She was thinking of something that seemed like perfectly respectable merchandise for the rear palace, but which could have an unexpected side effect.

“The toxic face powder,” Maomao said, and a flash of understanding could be seen on every face in the room. The summer before, Princess Lingli had fallen ill for reasons unknown. Simultaneously, the same thing had happened to Consort Lihua’s son, the heir apparent, who had subsequently died. Now, a non-lead-based face whitener was used in the rear palace, and the old stuff was no longer allowed. Perhaps it had caused them to let down their guard.

“Are you suggesting someone is deliberately trying to smuggle poison into the rear palace?” Jinshi ventured. Maomao didn’t nod, but she didn’t shake her head either. All she had at the moment was speculation, not proof. She felt close to certainty, but there was always the possibility she was wrong.

There was the resemblance to a previous incident. Then the fact that the resurrected palace servant, Suirei, was still at large, and that her background and contacts remained obscure. Maybe Jinshi had discovered something on that subject, but he was under no obligation to tell Maomao.

“I only noticed that many substances that are *potentially* harmful have entered the rear palace. No one of them need really be treated as poisonous.” She was cheating a little, couching everything she said as opinion. She disliked the idea that the merchants who had brought the products into the rear palace might be punished because of anything she said. She would let Jinshi make up his own mind. “I think, though, that it would be wise to warn the other consorts as well.”

That was all she would say.

The discussion had left Maomao exhausted. She remembered what her father had said; she could almost hear the old man’s gentle, grandmotherly voice warning her not to speak based on assumptions. So how much of what

she had said was an assumption, and how much was certain? The question made her feel a little queasy.

Maomao entered the kitchen and heated some water. When it had boiled, she cut it with some cold water and poured it into a glass cup, where the bulb of jasmine tea waited. The glass was an expensive piece of drinkware—but it was all right; she would be sure to wash it thoroughly when she was done.

Maomao had already used up her jasmine tea, unfortunately, but Shisui had given hers back. She'd had some now, she said, and didn't need more all to herself. Maomao might have preferred if Shisui had simply accepted the gift, but she didn't want to argue. Anyway, she liked this tea. Her "sisters" had let her taste it on the sly when there were no customers around, and drinking it now took her back.

The blossom began to soften and open in the warm water. Maomao sat in a chair and watched it. The fragrant aroma filled the air around her.

"I thought that was supposed to be poisonous, no?" a gorgeous voice said from above her. She looked up to see a face as pretty as the voice, lit by the single paper lantern that burned in the kitchen. It was already dark outside. The lantern light gave Jinshi's face a reddish cast—he really was disgustingly lovely.

"Many poisons have medicinal properties in small quantities," she replied. "A single cup of tea would barely have an effect of any kind. Anyhow, this is the kitchen. Hardly the sort of place you belong, Master Jinshi."

"Don't quibble."

"Where's Master Gaoshun?"

"I sent him to deliver a message."

The eunuch's august status didn't stop Maomao from pursing her lips at him. She held up the tea, the jasmine blossom now fully open, to the lamplight and inspected it. Then she took a sip, enjoying the way the flower bobbed in the water. She knew it was rude not to offer Jinshi any tea, but it was after hours. Time for him to go home.

"Besides," Maomao added, "I'm not pregnant."

"True enough." For some reason, Jinshi glanced away from her as he spoke. He was sitting diagonally across from her—when had he seated himself? "Not going to give me any tea?" he asked, eyeing the glass cup and the flower.

"What kind of tea would you like, sir?" Maomao stood, grumbling silently

about what a headache Jinshi could be. There was a shelf stocked with provisions for when visitors came, though. Maybe he'd like a nice, simple white tea.

Jinshi continued studying her glass. "I'd like to try some of this."

"I'm afraid that's the last of it." She'd poured the first steep into her glass; she could add more hot water, but all Jinshi would get would be the dregs.

"I don't mind. What other effects does this tea have?" Jinshi shifted in his chair, looking at the leaves.

"It encourages relaxation, for one thing. It can help with insomnia, but can also help one wake up. Additionally, while it isn't recommended during pregnancy, I've heard it can be helpful during childbirth."

"It seems the benefits far outweigh the harms."

"Yes. Which is why people often lose sight of them."

Was this the only time so much jasmine tea had come into the rear palace, or had it been brought here before as well? Maomao didn't know. It might be simple coincidence—or something more. She couldn't even be sure of that. It was possible that the tea, along with the clothing, was a way of feeling them out. A method for discovering if anyone in the rear palace was with child.

When previous caravans had visited, Maomao had either been working at Jinshi's residence, or tending to Consort Lihua in the Crystal Pavilion—or simply without money, when it came to the occasion before she had been assigned to Consort Gyokuyou's service. In other words, for lack of opportunity or lack of means, she had always been entirely uninterested in the visiting merchants. Even now, if it hadn't been for the sudden perfume oil fad, Maomao would likely not have noticed anything. Individually, everything the caravan brought appeared to be excellent luxury goods, after all.

"Will white tea do?"

Jinshi looked a bit put out and said nothing, but it wasn't her fault; they didn't have what they didn't have. Maomao set the kettle on the fire again and put some leaves in a small teapot. She took the kettle off before it boiled, figuring warm water would be enough, then poured it into the teapot slowly, letting the leaves steep. From there she poured the tea into a teacup and placed it in front of Jinshi. He took it, still looking annoyed.

Maomao, meanwhile, made a show of picking up her glass of jasmine tea. "There's another condition this tea can help with," she said.

“What’s that?”

“Impotence. Particularly in men.”

Jinshi fixed her with a thoroughly *un*amused look. *Oops*, she thought. Her sarcasm had worked a little too well. She bustled over to the shelf to get some snacks in hopes of repairing his mood, feeling a droplet of cold sweat run down her back.

Behind her, she heard him sipping tea. Then he said: “This isn’t really for me. I’m going home.” And just like that, he left.

Now I’ve done it, she thought, scowling to herself. When she went to get his teacup, though, she discovered it was untouched. Instead, her jasmine tea, from which she’d taken only a single sip, was half empty.

She drank every drop of the white tea, furious.

Chapter 5: Corpse Fungus (Part One)

Maomao was now teaching Xiaolan to read and write at the laundry area on an almost daily basis. Evidently Xiaolan wasn't the only maid who wanted to improve her literacy, for more and more of the women could be seen taking peeks at the characters scratched in the dust and trying to imitate them. "More and more," though, really only meant about five people, including Xiaolan; the rest were still perfectly happy to pass the time gossiping as they always had.

The unfortunate thing about Xiaolan's studious turn was that Maomao heard fewer of the palace rumors. Thus, the first she learned of this particular tale was from the quack doctor.

"One of the palace women disappeared?"

"That's what they say. A terrible turn of events," the quack said, stroking his measly beard. Maomao sipped some nondescript tea as she listened. "Her term of service was nearly up, and she'd even saved a passable dowry, so she was supposed to get married and leave the rear palace. I wonder whatever could have happened to her."

The rumor held that the woman had met a civil official at one of the garden parties the year before last and that they had been communicating by letter ever since. It was the old send-him-a-hair-stick routine. Capable women, even if they didn't serve one of the upper consorts, might be permitted excursions outside the rear palace to help with specific tasks. For such a distinguished person to simply disappear was quite strange.

"Not to say that it *never* happens," the quack mumbled. In those words, Maomao felt as if she might brush up against the darkness within the rear palace, and she didn't like it. A garden with two thousand women must have its shadows. On occasion, women had even killed themselves because of trouble with colleagues in the palace, although Maomao had never personally known anyone who had done so. Other times, a woman's "family" might find it congenial that she should leave palace service, and she would vanish with no warning and without so much as a word of farewell. There was a tacit

understanding that such disappearances would not be investigated too closely. In this case, though, because the woman had been supposed to get married, strange speculations began swirling.

"Supposedly the girl was bought by the Matron of the Serving Women herself, though, so no one wanted to pry too much," the doctor said as he bit into a rice cracker.

"Gracious," Maomao replied. She just tried to carry on with her usual work. The story had nothing to do with her.

At least, she hadn't thought so.

When Maomao got back to the Jade Pavilion, she found some very elegant nobles out in the courtyard, where some furniture had been moved to create a tea party that simply oozed high society. On one side of the table sat Gyokuyou. Her belly had swollen substantially by now, but she strategically used the surrounding shrubbery to de-emphasize the bulge when she could; she was also wearing clothing that hid the exact shape of her body. It would prevent people from knowing she was pregnant at a glance. Hongniang stood beside her lady, looking tense.

Gyokuyou staying inside forever was yet another thing that would raise suspicions, so she was letting herself be seen here. Even so, anyone who was going to figure it out would have done so long ago, Maomao thought. The question was whether "anyone" meant good or ill.

When she saw Maomao was back, Gyokuyou suggested moving inside. She stood, and Hongniang walked alongside her to conceal the consort's profile. She knew just which angle her lady would be most obvious from.

Jinshi slipped a glance at Maomao.

Something must be up, she thought, and followed them into the pavilion's reception area. "Pardon me very much," she said as she entered. Consort Gyokuyou was looking at her with her usual fidgety excitement, while Hongniang could hardly conceal how tired she was. As for the one who had summoned Maomao, he was sitting in a chair coolly sipping some tea. Gaoshun stood beside him, looking indignant.

"You called?" Maomao looked back and forth between Gyokuyou and Jinshi.

"Yes. I believe he has some business with you." Gyokuyou gestured at Jinshi with an open palm. This was how it always started.

"I do, and if you don't mind, we'll find somewhere for a quiet chat."

"Oh, you needn't trouble yourself. You can talk right here," the red-haired consort said, clearly a bit peeved.

"I'm afraid we very much cannot. It wouldn't do for me to stay here too long—and besides, the princess seems to be about ready for her nap." A crying child could be heard from outside. It was almost time for Lingli's afternoon nap, but before she went to sleep, she always had some of her mother's milk. They would have to think about weaning her soon, but it would take some time yet.

Gyokuyou adopted an almost girlish expression. The consort was pregnant with her second child, but she was still a young woman, just twenty years old. The exotic blood in her veins gave her a rather adult appearance, enhanced by her no-nonsense personality; together, they could make her seem quite old and experienced—but she was still bursting with youthful curiosity.

"Lady Gyokuyou, may I suggest you give in here." Hongniang, ever prepared to make sure work was getting done, opened the door of the room. Guiyuan was outside, holding the child and looking distinctly awkward. Hongniang took Lingli and held her out to Gyokuyou. The princess reached for the consort's collar.

Gyokuyou's face was still stormy, but she could hardly leave her dear, sweet child to starve, and she finally allowed Maomao and Jinshi to show themselves out of the room.

The two of them left the Jade Pavilion and worked their way, as so often, to the office of the Matron of the Serving Women.

The man needs his own damn room! Maomao thought. She had an idea: maybe they could renovate the spare storeroom in the medical office. Then the quack doctor would naturally feel obliged to bring them tea when they visited, at least. Maomao could relax, and the Matron could stop being constantly interrupted. It was effectively *three* birds with one stone.

The Matron's room was large but unadorned, without much to hold the interest, and since they had chased everyone else out, there was no one to bring them tea either.

At Gaoshun's urging, Maomao seated herself in one of the simple chairs. "What is it you need, sir?" she asked.

“I think you know that His Majesty has lately been distributing fiction novels to the consorts.”

Jinshi was simply assuming she knew about them. Which, of course, she did, so she nodded. “Yes, sir. My understanding is that after the consorts have read them, they’re to allow their ladies-in-waiting to read them, and then the ladies below those. Some copies are making the rounds as well. It’s even inspired some women to learn to read.”

Jinshi smiled a bit at that. Maomao could see she’d been right; he had planned this all along.

Gaoshun passed Jinshi a scroll, which he unrolled on the table.

“What’s this?” Maomao asked.

“My goal, although we’re still in the early stages. In the long run, this is what I’d like to create.” The scroll showed a plan of the rear palace. In the open space that was currently the plaza, however, there were several buildings. “In the marketplace, I believe what I have in mind might be called an institute of practical studies.”

In other words, a school.

Maomao’s eyes widened in appreciation. She’d suspected he was probably already thinking along such lines, but she was impressed at how quickly he moved. Although she often regarded Jinshi as if observing a bug or some filth, today she looked at him as if she were looking at a horse. It was a sign of how much she liked the idea, but for some reason Jinshi and Gaoshun both recoiled.

“Is something the matter, sirs?”

“No, it just...doesn’t quite feel right,” Jinshi said.

Even Gaoshun had something to say. “Yes, what happened to your normal expression? Are you feeling unwell?”

Maomao allowed her eyelids to droop so that she looked rather more skeptical; Jinshi let out a relieved breath and sat forward again. Why did he look so...satisfied? Was the eunuch *actually* a secret masochist?

“What do you think?” he asked, now that he had composed himself.

Maomao rubbed her chin thoughtfully. It wasn’t a bad idea. In fact, it was a pretty good one. First, they distribute novels throughout the rear palace via the Emperor to gauge the reaction. They’d been able to get the young ladies’ attention, and she could see the idea was more than just an impulse.

“I think it’s excellent. There are some people here who genuinely want to

learn, and even more importantly, it will do them some good after their term of service ends."

"Yes, certainly," Jinshi said, starting to smile. The expression might have caused some swooning if he hadn't chased everyone out already.

One thing bothered Maomao, though. She stared intently at the scroll.

"What is it?" Jinshi asked anxiously.

Maomao pointed to something on the plans. The current projected site for the "institute" was in the southern quarter of the rear palace, the plaza just near the main gate. It was more than large enough, and it would be easy to transport materials there, certainly an advantage. The Emperor would have to put up with it during construction, but since it was his idea, maybe that wasn't such an issue.

Not everyone, though, was willing to accept new things. Maomao looked hard at Jinshi. He nodded, silently giving her permission to speak her mind, so she said, "The southern quarter is where one finds the upper and middle consorts. Many, even if perhaps not all, of them are ladies of great pride."

With the building in its planned position, not only the Emperor but all the consorts would be constantly exposed to the sight of base illiterates gathering to receive their education. Surely not everyone would take kindly to that.

Jinshi was quiet. As one of the eunuchs of the rear palace, he knew the place well. He would understand what Maomao was driving at. The consorts would all put on brave faces, but some might secretly begin campaigns of harassment. The consorts themselves might not deign to get their hands dirty, but they could employ their ladies-in-waiting or the maids to do things. They wouldn't target the building itself, either, but the other palace women who started going there.

"I think the northern quarter might be preferable," Jinshi declared. The north was the most isolated part of the rear palace. Very few consorts went there on purpose.

"Yes, sir. And I daresay there's no need to build an entirely new facility there. You could simply renovate one of the many abandoned structures already available." Frankly, Maomao thought, it would be a waste of resources to build something new. No matter how much pull Jinshi might have, he could be expected to smash the lovely nose off his face if it would save money.

Maomao wasn't done offering ideas, though. "One other thing, sir," she

said. “I might suggest that rather than openly building the place as a school, it be presented as professional training for those who aspire to better positions. A school is seen as all about *studying*. You have to lure them in by making it clear that going there will help them eat.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes; farmers’ children are constantly aware of the dangers of hunger. And speaking of eating, perhaps you could offer a snack during the breaks sometimes.”

“Daily snacks, excellent idea,” Jinshi said, nodding.

“No, sir, only sometimes. You mustn’t feed them every day.”

“Why not?”

If snacks were offered on a daily basis, some people would come only when they wanted to eat. Make the snacks unpredictable—take away the guarantee that one would be able to eat at these classes—and people would come every day to make sure they didn’t miss a meal.

“You really think so?”

“What gambler was ever hooked on a game where they won every time?”

Jinshi didn’t respond. His overall idea was a good one, but she could see touches of naivete that came from his fine upbringing. He seemed to recognize the same thing—that was why he was here asking for her opinion.

“These are only my subjective observations; you might want to ask others for their thoughts as well,” she said. She wasn’t out of observations, but she decided she’d said enough. She couldn’t have them simply going along with whatever she said and thought.

She wasn’t sure it had been necessary to leave the Jade Pavilion to have this conversation. She glanced at Jinshi, wondering if she was free to leave yet, but then Gaoshun produced more papers still.

“There’s something else,” Jinshi said. “Are you knowledgeable about mushrooms?”

Maomao frowned, wondering what this was about. “I’ve always gone into the mountains to find them a few times each year, as they’re important for both cooking and making medicines.” There were plenty of poisonous mushrooms out there, but there were also no small number that could be turned into valuable remedies. “Are they of interest to you?” Maomao forced herself to hold back the grin that threatened to spread across her face.

“A few palace women get food poisoning every year around this time. We

warn them, but there's always somebody who ignores us."

"Some appetites are simply bigger than others," Maomao said. No one was going to starve in the rear palace, but there were some who found the meals provided to be insufficient. The only ones who could expect a snack during the day were the attendants of the consorts, or else those with whom someone deigned to share a treat.

"Why, last year, someone even supposedly had some mushrooms in the medical office with the doctor himself."

Maomao didn't say anything to that.

"And fruit seems to go missing from the orchards on a startlingly regular basis."

Or that. Privately, she wanted to object that those mushrooms hadn't been poisonous, but in fact quite delicious. As for the fruit, she'd just helped to make space so the remaining fruit could ripen better. At least, that was her excuse.

"Thus, what I want is to preempt any wayward palace women. I want to get rid of the mushrooms before anyone can accidentally eat them. As we do so, I want you to tell me exactly what kind of poison each one contains. You'll be exempt from your duties at the Jade Pavilion, except for food tasting."

Hmm... Maomao nodded, but she was thinking this was all a little strange. So far, they hadn't said anything that couldn't have been discussed in front of Consort Gyokuyou. If anything, it would have been convenient for her to get the full story about the mushroom inspections. *There's still something he's not telling me*, Maomao thought, but she wasn't so oblivious as to say it out loud. In fact, she was perfectly happy with Jinshi's request. The job would be nothing if not interesting.

She said only, "Very well, sir," the smallest of smiles on her lips.

There were plenty of places mushrooms might grow in the rear palace. It was often called a garden of women, but plenty of actual plants grew there too, including plots of carefully tended flowers and trees, fruit orchards, and pine groves. The humidity of the warm season would soon mean mushrooms everywhere.

One of the trickiest things about mushrooms was that edible and poisonous ones often looked much alike. Oyster mushrooms and moonlight

mushrooms, for example, were easily confused, and there had been cases of food poisoning in the pleasure district when customers had unintentionally given the wrong one as a gift.

Some places were more congenial to mushrooms than others. Oyster mushrooms would grow virtually anywhere, but moonlight mushrooms were more common in the mountains. Maomao doubted they would find any of those in the rear palace.

If they were going to conduct a mushroom hunt, Maomao figured they could ignore places frequented by the gardeners. That included anywhere the Emperor was apt to come for flower viewing. Most such places were in the southern quarter, which was where the upper and middle consorts had their residences, and was thus packed with proud ladies. Those areas would be kept free of mushrooms.

So, where should *we start?* Maomao thought, looking at the plans Jinshi had provided, her feet barely touching the ground.

"W-Welcome back," Yinghua said, sounding a bit unsure of herself.

"Thanks, good to be back."

"Hey! You can't go in there like that!" Yinghua said, brushing Maomao's head and clothes gently. She had leaves in her hair and twigs stuck in her robes. Must have been that tree she'd climbed. "I don't know what they've got you doing out there, but I wish you'd stop coming back such a wreck."

"Such a wreck," Maomao thought. Yinghua certainly told it like it was. Maomao nodded, though; she had to respect that they were trying to keep things sanitary given that there was a small child and a pregnant woman around. She went for a quick change of clothes and dusted herself off.

It had been a very fulfilling day for Maomao. She'd gathered an entire basket full of mushrooms, including quite a few medicinal ones. She'd told the quack they were poisonous; she figured that would keep even him from eating them. Granted, he'd hardly looked able to restrain himself even so—but she would just have to trust him. Maomao (the cat) proved wiser than the quack; she hadn't even spared the mushrooms a glance. Having found a bounty of unusual fungus, though, Maomao (the human) was feeling quite satisfied.

"Maomao, you kind of, uh, smell. Like...something," Yinghua said.

"Do I?"

Now that she thought about it, her nose had stung a bit when she was out collecting mushrooms. Maybe it was from all the running around. Or maybe it was from that place Shisui had told her about. There had been lots of mushrooms there. The overflowing waste water seemed to make good fertilizer.

"Lady Gyokuyou will be having dinner. Once you're changed, will you be able to—?"

Ah, yes: the day wasn't over yet, Maomao realized. It seemed a little earlier than usual for dinner, but it wouldn't do for the food taster to be late. "I'll be right there," she said, and shuffled quickly back to her room.

When she arrived at Consort Gyokuyou's quarters, the woman was tying a black string around her wrist. That was typical practice in the rear palace when someone of noble status had passed on, but this string was less elaborate than the ones that had been used when the crown prince had died. Gyokuyou was dressed as she always was; instead, it was Hongniang who wore plainer clothes than usual.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm a little early," Consort Gyokuyou said.

"It's quite all right, milady."

Hongniang must have seen the implicit question on Maomao's face, because she said, "I have to go out after dinner today. I'm sorry, but I'll need you to come with me."

"Yes, ma'am."

She understood perfectly well why Hongniang was dressed so somberly. Hongniang gave Maomao a black band as well. They were on their way to a funeral, she surmised. Such things were ordinarily considered unfit for the rear palace, in which the Son of Heaven might be born, but they simply called it something else and did it anyway. From the fact that Hongniang was attending in Gyokuyou's place, Maomao suspected it was one of the middle- or lower-ranked consorts who had died.

"You can wear the clothes you have on, but take off that hair tie," Hongniang instructed. Maomao nodded and took the first dish to taste it for poison.

Hongniang brought Maomao to a ritual site in the northern quarter. In a country that loved ceremonies and observances as much as this one, even the

rear palace had a small place to host them. This one normally went unadorned, but the eunuchs had clearly exerted themselves to get it ready for this funeral in short order.

About once a year, Gyokuyou was expected to serve as the officiant at a ritual, but so far the role hadn't come to her during Maomao's time in her service. Such offices were usually the province of men, but in the special circumstances of the rear palace, women could take the job. The duty passed from one upper consort to the next in sequence.

The funeral attendees formed two lines in front of the altar, where they were offering flowers passed out by women who appeared to be ladies-in-waiting to the late consort. Maomao stood behind Hongniang and accepted a flower from one of the ladies. It didn't smell the way such blossoms normally did, though. Perhaps another unique facet of the rear palace?

Hm? Maomao noticed that the hand of the woman who had given her the flower was red. *Is that a rash?* The hand was noticeably swollen. Maomao glanced at her own left arm—one of the scars there resembled the woman's swelling.

These thoughts were still running through Maomao's head as she approached the altar to offer her flower. There was a large coffin draped in a white cloth. Maybe she would be moved later; through the cloth, Maomao could just make out a human silhouette inside.

According to Hongniang, the deceased consort was the daughter of a high official, a woman of notable status among the middle consorts—but Maomao guessed from Hongniang's tone that the woman hadn't been very likable. About a year before, her health had started to fail. She'd shut herself up in her room, but hadn't gone back to her family home. The Emperor never visited her. "She could certainly have gone home if she'd wanted to," Hongniang had remarked with an acerbic touch in her voice. Then, just when the consort was weakest, the weather had turned warm and she'd gotten a bout of food poisoning.

It was unusual for the normally disciplined Hongniang to tear into a dead person like that. When the two of them had gotten out of the flower line, Maomao said quietly, "Did she do something?"

It was an offhanded question; she didn't necessarily expect Hongniang to tell her. It was more than a lady-in-waiting needed to know.

To her surprise, though, Hongniang whispered back, "You remember

someone once attempted to poison Lady Gyokuyou? They never found the culprit, but...” Hongniang glanced toward the coffin.

Now it made sense. Hongniang was intensely loyal; of course she would resent anyone she suspected of trying to harm her mistress. She might even be secretly relieved the woman was dead.

Wait... An idea formed in Maomao’s mind. This middle consort, dead of food poisoning, had made an attempt on Gyokuyou’s life. The very Gyokuyou who was presently pregnant, and thus more cautious than usual around the other consorts and palace women. Then there was Jinshi’s request the day before that Maomao find all the poisonous mushrooms. He’d taken such care that Gyokuyou and the others not know what he’d asked.

Removing any sentiment for the residents of the Jade Pavilion from the equation, it was impossible to say for certain that Gyokuyou hadn’t poisoned the middle consort before the dead woman could do the same to her. Food poisoning was the official word, but if the cause had been a mushroom, then everything would fit together. Maomao could easily imagine what would happen if the other women of the Jade Pavilion knew what Jinshi was thinking. Even the gorgeous eunuch could expect his reception there to change if they found out. Maomao sometimes thought Jinshi was perhaps a little *too* much Gyokuyou’s personal ally, but in this matter, at least, he was being scrupulously fair.

Doubt Consort Gyokuyou had anything to do with it. She might not have been fond of the other consort, but there were any number of ways to break an opponent’s spirit and ensure it didn’t come back. Trying to poison someone just in case they attempted to poison you (again) seemed a great deal of trouble. There was always the possibility of being found out. Nor did Hongniang or the three other girls of the Jade Pavilion seem like the kinds to resort to such underhanded methods.

No, in any attempted poisoning, the prime suspect at the Jade Pavilion would be Maomao.

Huh! If Jinshi’s aim with the matter of the mushrooms had been to gauge Maomao’s reaction, she wasn’t upset. She was even a little impressed. Maomao hadn’t done anything to get her hands dirty, of course. *I wonder what kind of food poisoning the woman did die of.*

Maomao would be very pleased to find out, but she sighed, knowing it would be difficult. She was just about to follow Hongniang back to the Jade

Pavilion when there was a stupendous crash. She turned and saw that a woman with her face wrapped in bandages had upset the altar. The offering rice and wine were scattered on the ground.

Puffy red skin could be seen peeking out from under the woman's bandages. Her outfit was plain, but it was of fine material, not like the uniforms the maids wore. She was no simple palace woman, nor a lady-in-waiting either, Maomao suspected.

"Stop that!" cried a palace woman as she grabbed the interloper, but the other woman shook her off and stood in front of the coffin, where she ripped off the white cloth that covered it. The assembled women gasped, cried out, and scattered. Even the strong-stomached Hongniang gave a yelp.

A woman lay there, dressed in white. The skin of her face was red and swollen, and half the hair on her head had fallen out. She looked almost as if she'd been fried in oil—hardly what one would call a blossoming flower of the rear palace.

The intruder grinned through her bandages. "Ha ha ha ha! You see now? You reap what you sow!" she cried, even as a group of eunuchs arrived to restrain her. "You're more hideous than I ever was!" Her laughter filled the twilight.

Maomao studied them both, the dead body and what she could see of the other woman's face through her bandages. The wounds, almost like burns, looked familiar to her.

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Chapter 6: Corpse Fungus (Part Two)

The next day, Maomao learned that the instigator of the trouble at the funeral had been one of the low-ranking consorts. She was the daughter of a prosperous merchant house and was of a pleasant disposition; supposedly the Emperor had even been to visit her on several occasions. But about this time the year before last, she'd been beset by a mysterious illness that caused her face to swell and redden and her hair to fall out. There had been talk of dismissing her, but she would never be able to find a husband if she went back home looking like she did. Instead she remained a lower consort, drawing her salary, in what had to be considered a show of the Emperor's goodwill.

The real question was, what had driven this consort to show up spitting and cursing at the dead woman's funeral? The simple answer would seem to be that the deceased middle consort had caused the mysterious illness.

The lower consort had fallen ill about this time two years ago, and it was in the same season this year that the middle consort had died. The symptoms of the disease rang a bell for Maomao. On a hunch, she went to one particular place, and when she found exactly what she had expected, her suspicion turned to certainty.

She had come looking for a specific species of thoroughly poisonous red mushroom. She collected a sample, wrapping it carefully in several layers of cloth.

She was almost sure this was the kind of mushroom Jinshi had been looking for.

Maomao asked a eunuch to send a letter to Gaoshun, and the next day, he and Jinshi arrived. Considering the specimen they were dealing with, the medical office seemed like the place for today's discussion. The quack doctor fussed around making tea. Maomao the cat groomed herself before curling up to sleep.

The quack might not be any good at mixing up medicines, but he made a

mean cup of tea. It didn't seem like the best idea to have someone smiling and setting out snacks while you were handling a poisonous mushroom, though, so Maomao politely turned down his hospitality. He shuffled away, his mustache drooping. She felt bad, but what else was she supposed to do? She noticed him sneaking little peeks at them—he looked sort of lonely—so she made sure to close the door tight. As she did so, the doctor's look turned to one of genuine sadness, but she paid him no mind.

"Wrap this around your hands, Master Jinshi. And this is for your mouth." Maomao handed him and Gaoshun some squares of cloth. Then she took her own advice and covered her mouth and hands. She really would have liked to have proper gloves available, but she hadn't been able to find anything thick enough on short notice. Jinshi and Gaoshun looked a bit doubtful, but they covered themselves up just like Maomao. She produced a wooden box.

"Is that it?" Jinshi asked, his voice muffled by the cloth.

"Yes, sir. A very poisonous mushroom." Maomao opened the lid and pulled back several layers of cloth to reveal a mushroom that did indeed look very dangerous. It looked like a red, swollen finger; it could hardly have been clearer that this was not something you were supposed to put in your mouth.

This mushroom grew near withered broadleaf trees, and even a single bite of it could be lethal. In fact, to make it even more dangerous, simply touching it could be enough to poison a person.

"I found it in a grove in the northern quarter."

Unlike the southern part of the rear palace, the Emperor rarely visited the northern area. As such, evocative and beautiful vistas were less important, and parts of the land were allowed to go to waste while buildings stood empty. Even this grove, which had once been a distinguished piece of landscaping, had been neglected until now it was in a terrible state. Apparently, though, it was a state these mushrooms preferred, for they had begun to appear there.

It could only be called bad luck: Maomao had searched over much of the rear palace, but she was only one woman and could hardly canvass the entire place. If she'd noticed these mushrooms, she certainly would have at least alerted Jinshi. They were just that dangerous.

They were also relatively rare, which was why it hadn't occurred to her that they might be growing here until the recent incident. If missing them had been bad luck, the fact that she had found them now was good luck.

“These mushrooms can cause your hand to swell just by touching them,” she said. “And *don’t* get them anywhere near your face. Otherwise you’ll end up like this,” she added, rolling her sleeve back from her left arm. She undid the wrappings slightly, revealing her wrist. It was swollen an angry red and bore a welt that would probably never disappear. Indeed, it looked very much like the lower consort’s face...and like the scar on the arm of the lady-in-waiting who had given Maomao her flower.

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“I only brushed against one gently out of personal interest, and this is what happened,” Maomao said.

She’d simply been testing it, as she did so many poisons she encountered. Several times each year she and her old man would go into the mountains to collect medicinal herbs, and it was on one such occasion that she had found one of these mushrooms.

Touching it had turned out to be a poor choice. Even her slight brush had caused her skin to swell up and turn an angry red color. When her old man had seen it, he’d immediately doused her wrist under running water, but the swelling wouldn’t go away.

“I noticed you always kept that arm bandaged... It was because there are scars under there?” Jinshi was looking at Maomao closely, his face somewhat stiff. Come to think of it, she’d never shown the eunuch her scars before.

“Not to worry, sir. I give myself these scars in the ordinary course of my experiments.” She rewrapped the bandage and tucked the cockscomb-like mushroom back in its box. She would have to dispose of it properly later.

“*What* experiments?”

“Just things of personal interest.”

“Interests? *What* interests?” The blood had drained from Jinshi’s face, but as for Maomao, she wanted to hurry up and finish this conversation.

Pretending she hadn’t heard him, she said, “The body in the coffin had a swollen face, and her hair had fallen out. I suspect she was suffering from the effects of this mushroom. Wasn’t that what you wanted to know about, Master Jinshi?”

“Perceptive, as ever.” It was not Jinshi but Gaoshun who spoke, a strained smile on his face. Maybe they hadn’t wanted anyone else to know that the middle consort’s cause of death had been a poisonous mushroom. That, however, struck Maomao as most unnatural.

“Could you explain the situation to me in more detail?” she asked. Maybe it would be better for her not to know, but *not* knowing would be even worse.

Jinshi’s shapely eyebrows creased and he stole a glance at Gaoshun. Gaoshun’s face, though, remained impassive, and finally Jinshi sighed deeply. “Consort Jin had been ill for nearly a year before her death. Her face and head were so badly swollen she could barely talk.”

Jinshi visited the middle consorts about once a month, including the sick woman, Jin. Whenever he went to see her, he said, he’d found her lying in

her sleeping chamber, looking agonized.

There was a lower consort with similar symptoms, and, just like her, by His Majesty's good offices, Jin was to be allowed to remain in the rear palace. A variety of rumors circulated about Jin, but she was the daughter of a high official, and there was no telling what might happen if she came back to him looking like she did.

Consort Jin had previously been known for her haughty personality, more than ready to flaunt her father's authority any time it suited her, but her illness seemed to subdue her, and she had become very withdrawn.

Hmm, Maomao thought. Jinshi, she realized, must be a very diligent person; from Consort Gyokuyou to the lower consort at the funeral, he had to pay the utmost attention to these women.

Consort Jin, it seemed, had used the poisonous mushroom against the lower consort, and had then attempted to use it on someone else—but had mistakenly touched it herself, ultimately leaving her disfigured and with no hope of attention from the Emperor. She was handled in the simplest feasible way: she would be allowed to stay in the rear palace so long as she caused no further trouble. It sounded cruel, but sometimes that was the sort of solution one had to adopt in politics.

However, Jin had been a proud woman. "Unable to bear the state she was in, she finally poisoned herself and committed suicide," Jinshi said. "At least, that was the testimony of her ladies-in-waiting." Jin had had five ladies, and all of them had given the same story. Everything *appeared* to match up. It was Jinshi's responsibility, though, to think of things from a variety of angles. That was part of the reason he hadn't spoken to Consort Gyokuyou about this.

"So you wanted to know where she got the poison," Maomao said, and Jinshi nodded. There was no telling how Jin's father would react to the news of his daughter's death, but if there had been underhanded dealings involved, then he would hardly have any choice but to make minimal fuss.

Maomao *hmm*ed again and, taking the handkerchief away from her mouth, stroked her chin. "A question, sir. That would imply that she *ate* the poisonous mushroom in order to kill herself, wouldn't it?"

"That's right."

But that only made things stranger. Jin's face had been red and swollen. It would have made sense had it been that way for some time, but some of the

swelling was clearly fresh.

"It's true that this mushroom causes swelling upon physical contact," Maomao said. "But I would expect eating it to produce swelling of the tongue and inside of the mouth—I didn't know it could cause inflammation of the face as well."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. This mushroom causes stomach pain and vomiting and can even induce paralysis. However, considering the extent of the deceased woman's swelling, the only conclusion I can reach is that the mushroom was rubbed directly on her face."

That was when something else occurred to Maomao: the hand of the dead woman as she lay there in the coffin wasn't swollen at all. If she'd been so desperate to die that she had rubbed the mushroom all over her own face, she surely wouldn't have taken the trouble, as Maomao had done here, to protect her hands.

Maomao stroked her chin again, grunting to herself. The answer was starting to seem clear, but she had no real proof. And without that, she was unwilling to say much more to Jinshi.

"You sound like you're beating around the bush," Jinshi said. He was staring at her as she thought. His face was very close to hers; there was hardly an inch between their foreheads. "If you have something in mind, then just say it."

Maomao didn't find it that easy to simply spit out what she was thinking, though. Instead she looked at the ground and said, "Do you have time a few days from now? Also, if possible, I'd like to borrow a few strong eunuchs. Men with sturdy stomachs—and tight lips."

Jinshi looked perplexed by this request, but nonetheless said, "Very well. If that's what it takes to get to the bottom of this, they're yours."

"I can't make any promises."

"It doesn't matter. Do it." The command in his voice was unmistakable.

Good, it's better that way. Maomao was just a minor palace woman. Things were so much easier when he treated her as such. "Understood, sir," she said with a bow of her head.

Maomao spent the next three days searching, based on her study of the plan of the rear palace. Starting from the area around Consort Jin's residence,

she searched high and low for one particular thing. The quest left her muddy and gross, so that she provoked a chorus of screams from the other ladies-in-waiting each time she came back to the Jade Pavilion. Finally she took to keeping a change of clothes at the medical office.

And then, a story made its way to her from the quack and from the gossipy girls at the laundry area. Something related to a rumor that had gone around some days before. Even with this new information in mind, Maomao couldn't be sure. But it made far more sense to her than the testimony of Consort Jin's women did.

The day after she'd finished her preparations, three eunuchs came to meet Maomao, Gaoshun among them. She'd asked for strong men, and she had to admit, he fit the bill. Jinshi had other business to attend to and hadn't come. Maomao knew that as lackadaisical as he looked, he actually kept quite busy. She sometimes reflected that being *too* good at looking carefree could have its own drawbacks.

"Thank you all for coming." Maomao bowed her head, then handed a shovel to each of the men. Two of them looked at her in mild confusion, but as Gaoshun didn't say anything, they refrained from asking questions. Maomao was impressed. Someone had found men who knew how to play along.

With that, she started for the grove in the northern quarter. Not the one in which she'd found the notorious poisonous mushroom, but another neglected corner piled with fallen leaves. The breeze carried an odor that made her nose prickle.

Maomao pointed to one particular place in the grove, where mushrooms could be seen dotting the ground among the leaves. "Would you be so kind as to dig here?" She'd circled three places on the map of the rear palace. She'd come here first because she thought it had the highest chance of containing what she was looking for.

The eunuchs cleared away the fallen leaves with their shovels, then began digging into the earth. The soil was moist and soft and gave way easily. Maomao felt like she ought to help, but Gaoshun had declined her offer in light of the injury to her leg, and she had decided to let him win that argument. Incidentally, this time the leg was finally healing properly.

Abruptly, one of the eunuchs grimaced and covered his nose. Everyone

else promptly followed suit. The upturned earth gave off an offensive, ripe smell that assaulted their nostrils; it was far stronger than the whiff they'd caught on the breeze earlier. Gaoshun's eyes started to water. He could see some kind of cloth in the hole.

"So this is why you asked for men with strong stomachs..." He stuck his shovel in the ground, his brow more furrowed than usual. He gave the soil a good kick, turning it over with his shoe.

It is, and I see he made good choices, Maomao thought. One of the eunuchs was expressionless, the other smiling grimly as they regarded what emerged from the ground. Maomao was glad there was no one else present. Otherwise there would have been a great deal of screaming or fainting, either of which would have made this substantially harder than it had to be.

And what *had* emerged from the ground? The bones of a human hand and arm. Bits of flesh still clung to it, but it had clearly been buried for quite some time. They had found a corpse.

"Is this the proof you were looking for?" Gaoshun asked.

Maomao looked down. "I have to admit, I didn't think I would find it on the first try." Hence why she'd marked two other possible spots.

Feeling strangely queasy, Maomao watched the men exhume the body.

Maomao didn't have to explain who the corpse was. It was still wearing several lovely accessories, each of which carried the crest of one consort in particular: Consort Jin.

She had already been dead a year ago.

Gaoshun placed the body in a wooden box that would serve as a coffin, then turned to Maomao with a tired look. The other two eunuchs had been dismissed; their part in this was over. No doubt they would be eager for a bath. Gaoshun assured her they wouldn't say anything, and she trusted him.

"Consort Jin died a year ago," Maomao said. "We can't know whether it was murder or an accident, but we can be confident her ladies-in-waiting knew of her demise."

They were in the medical office, which they had borrowed for their discussion. Gaoshun held a teacup but didn't drink from it. Instead he looked Maomao in the eye and said, "Then who did we hold that funeral for?"

"There would have been someone else who knew about the consort's death, someone besides the ladies-in-waiting." Maomao took a piece of paper

from the folds of her robe. It was a drawing of a young woman, a sketch Maomao had produced after picking the brains of the women at the laundry area about the palace woman who had mysteriously vanished. Gaoshun studied it for a moment, then shook his head.

"You've heard there was a palace woman who went missing?" Maomao said.

"Yes..."

Such vanished women frequently turned up dead by their own hands within a few days. It was impossible to escape this flower garden with its deep moat and high walls, and trying to do so meant death anyway.

"Say a consort's face were to be disfigured so badly that only her ladies-in-waiting would be likely to know who she was." And suppose her head was then wrapped in bandages, and she could hardly talk—it would be easy enough for her to deceive someone who only saw her once a month. Even better for her if that person was neither able nor expected to stay in a consort's chambers very long.

"You're suggesting the missing woman was actually a coconspirator?"

"I couldn't offer any specifics. It simply seems like a reasonable deduction." Maomao could think of a few reasons why the women might do such a thing—but these deductions were just slightly less reasonable, and she decided to keep them to herself.

Suppose the jealous Consort Jin had despised the fact that a woman who looked so much like her had earned the affections of an official, while she herself languished without so much as a single visit from the Emperor. She found every opportunity to needle the woman, provocation finally turned to quarrel, and by design or by accident, Jin died.

The ladies-in-waiting, never too enamored of their mistress, decided to lie and say that the consort had fallen ill, both out of self-preservation and sympathy for the other lady. The culprit's sense of guilt left her with no choice but to join them in their story.

The woman's impending marriage, though, threatened to unravel the deception. When her term of service ended, there would be no one for Jinshi to see when he arrived the next month. Panicked, the ladies-in-waiting had—

Better stop there, Maomao thought. Let the bigwigs pick whatever motive they thought was fitting.

Maomao took a sip of tea as the thoughts flitted through her head.

Gaoshun seemed to understand that she didn't want to speculate aloud, because he didn't press her further. He did, however, ask one question.

"How did you know she was buried there of all places?"

There had been no traces of burial in the patch of earth Maomao had chosen. A suspicious soul might have wondered if Maomao herself were the culprit.

"Disturbed earth isn't the only kind of evidence." A profusion of mushrooms had popped up over the body—and different kinds of mushrooms grow in different places. "My adoptive father taught me that that particular kind of mushroom favors manure—or dead animals." Otherwise, you didn't see it much. That was why Maomao had been so excited when she spotted the mushrooms. She'd assumed they were growing in overflowing waste from the sewers. Not that that wouldn't have been bad enough, but now she knew she'd been enjoying a little mushroom hunt right over a human corpse.

"I figured that accounted for the smell. I apologize—I couldn't be sure, as I'm not supposed to touch dead bodies."

The sewer hadn't been backed up after all; it had been the smell of rot seeping out of the earth as the weather got warmer. No wonder Yinghua had found the odor so unpleasant.

Gaoshun grimaced again. The creases in his brow were practically valleys. Somehow, she felt like he was glaring at her. "May I ask one more thing?" he said, in a way that gave her a bad feeling. "What do you plan to do with all the mushrooms you picked recently?"

This time it was Maomao's turn to fall silent. She shot a glance at her basket, bulging with mushrooms she'd intended to sort through later. "You must understand, sir, there are a great many interesting specimens in there."

"Specimens of mushrooms that grow from corpses?"

"No, I found nothing so caterpillar-fungus-like as that."

She wondered if there even was such a thing; if so, she'd certainly like to see it once in her life. She wondered what effects it might possibly have.

Maomao's motivation was innocent curiosity, but so few people understood that. So few people, including the dedicated, fastidious Gaoshun.

He had every last mushroom disposed of. The heartless monster.

Chapter 7: Mirrors

One hot afternoon, Maomao was told that a strange object from a foreign land had arrived in the Jade Pavilion and that she should come and see it. When she arrived in the main room, she found a large, full-length mirror. Consort Gyokuyou was standing in front of it, gleefully holding the clothes she'd bought from the caravan up to herself. Hongniang was carefully folding away the cloth in which the mirror had been wrapped.

One might wonder about such fuss over a mirror, even a full-length one, but when Maomao saw it, she was surprised, and not just by the size.

Now, that is *something you don't see every day*, she thought. Typically, mirrors were made of bronze, like the polished sheet of metal Maomao used. This mirror, though, wasn't metal at all, and it reflected Gyokuyou's image far more clearly than any bronze surface.

"Ho ho. I wonder if you know what it's made of," Gyokuyou said.

"Perhaps glass, milady?"

Gyokuyou pouted. Evidently, she'd guessed right.

Yinghua and Guiyuan were ecstatic:

"Oh my goodness! It really is like there's two of you standing there, Lady Gyokuyou!"

"Yes, it's amazing!"

"We had a mirror once before, but *Yinghua* broke it."

"Aw, don't bring that up!"

Glass mirrors were unusual but not unheard of. Making them was a difficult endeavor, though, and the only examples were those brought over from the west, so they were enormously expensive. A lady-in-waiting who broke one could well expect to lose her head. It was Yinghua's great good fortune that Consort Gyokuyou was as kindhearted as she was.

Looking at the new treasure, Maomao began to understand the excitement. A bronze mirror inevitably muddied colors, but this mirror was different. The glass had been stretched long and thin, yet there were no imperfections in the surface; the reflection was perfect.

Yinghua smirked when she saw Maomao staring intently into the mirror. “So it’s got even your interest, Maomao.”

“Yes. How *do* you think they produce material like this? If we could figure it out, I bet we could sell them for a small fortune.”

“Er... Yeah, sure,” Yinghua said, patting Maomao encouragingly on the shoulder. Maybe she’d been hoping for an appraisal from some other perspective.

“Was it a gift from His Majesty?” Maomao asked.

“No, from the visiting embassy,” Gyokuyou said, passing the clothes to Guiyuan and sitting down on her couch.

“Embassy, ma’am?” Come to think of it, the doctor had mentioned something of the sort in passing. He’d said the recent caravan had been especially large in part because it was laying the groundwork to welcome these visitors.

“That’s right. They gave mirrors to the other consorts too.” Yinghua sounded distinctly put out. Hongniang scolded her to speak more politely, but in her heart she must have felt the same way.

In principle, Gyokuyou ranked exactly as highly as the other three upper consorts, so the diplomatic mission would be obliged to treat them all equally. Still, to bring such rich gifts must have taken quite the effort, Maomao thought. Whether it traveled across the sands or across the sea, glass was easy to break. It would have to be treated very carefully to avoid any impacts that might shatter it.

Maomao looked at the mirror and thought: if the visitors were giving such exquisite gifts even to the consorts, they must be looking to land a major trade deal or something. What could it be that they wanted?

It was the very next day that Gaoshun came to her seeking her advice.

“What’s going on?” Maomao asked as she set out tea. Hongniang, the chief lady-in-waiting, was also in the room with them; she presumably felt that no man, not even a eunuch, should be alone with a palace woman.

At the moment, she was eyeing Gaoshun with an expression of fatigue. Now in her thirties, Hongniang had probably hoped to land this diligent, decent man for herself, but when she had learned recently that he already had a wife and children, she promptly lost all interest in him. (Far be it from her to seek to be anyone’s mistress.) Hongniang was such a competent chief

lady-in-waiting that she probably wasn't expecting to get married anytime soon, anyway.

Gaoshun, for his part, seemed unbothered by the fact that Hongniang was there, leading Maomao to suppose that the matter wasn't one of any great import.

"I was hoping to get your opinion on something, Xiaomao," he said. According to Gaoshun, it had to do with a request he'd received from an acquaintance; today's visit had nothing to do with Jinshi. This wasn't the first time a friend of Gaoshun's had sought his help—there had been that case of food poisoning. Maybe this was related.

"If you think I can be of help," Maomao said, and seated herself in a chair.

Hongniang politely made tea for Maomao. Her long service had given her a knack for making delicious tea, but she'd snapped at Maomao once for saying so. It seemed she disliked any comments that reminded her of her age—a fact Maomao had made a careful mental note of.

"Very well," Gaoshun said, and began.

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A certain distinguished household had two daughters. They were close in age and similar in appearance, and their parents doted on both of them, to the point of being overprotective. When the young women reached marriageable age, their parents categorically refused to let them leave the house alone. Instead they were kept inside all day long, and even then there were always ladies-in-waiting to watch them.

The ladies-in-waiting took pity on the young women—perhaps the treatment seemed cruel to them—and frequently helped the girls sneak out of the house when their parents weren't looking. That couldn't last long, though, and when they were found out, guards were placed outside the girls' room as well. Perhaps that was what prompted the daughters, who had always been somewhat withdrawn, to spend all day, every day at their preferred pastime of embroidery. They spoke with no man other than their father, and the male guards assigned to watch the room were never supposed to be closer than fifty meters from the girls' residence. At night, their father would lock the building to ensure they couldn't leave.

After quite some time of this, something incredible happened—one of the girls, the younger sister, was found to be pregnant. Her father was incandescent: how could this be, he wanted to know, when she had never so much as touched a man? Her mother bewailed that this should have happened to her unmarried daughter. Only the other sister, the elder, took the girl's side. She said something almost as incredible as the event itself:

"One of the hermit-immortals impregnated her."

Her parents were again incensed; her story was patently absurd. Yet they couldn't deny that the guards had performed their job impeccably; meanwhile, the mother and father had dismissed all the former ladies-in-waiting who had helped the young women get out of the house and replaced them with new ones who were prevented from contact with the young ladies as much as possible so as not to develop sympathy for them.

Her parents were at a loss, for it did indeed seem that only magic could have allowed anyone inside that building.

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"That is indeed a strange story," Maomao said, sipping her tea. At Gaoshun's invitation, Hongniang, too, had taken a seat and was dividing the snacks. She cut into a large mooncake that was filled with walnut paste. She was obviously invested in the story as well, for example exclaiming "How terrible!" when the girl was revealed to be pregnant.

"My acquaintance was at his wits' end and asked me what I thought he should do."

"I can see where it would be a troubling situation, but I can't help thinking that it's not exactly my field," Maomao said, and she meant it. "Unless perhaps you're asking me whether there are any cases of a woman becoming pregnant without the intervention of a man."

"*Are* there any such cases?"

"No, none in which the woman was actually with child. However, sometimes the body can *behave* as if it were pregnant, even when it isn't."

The human body is a mysterious thing, and a persistent belief can occasionally cause symptoms to appear in the absence of a physical cause. Suppose someone hates going to work and wishes they could stay home: as the hour to go to work approaches, they may find their stomach begins to

hurt. Maomao knew of a young courtesan who said she was pregnant with the child of the man she loved and showed the signs of early pregnancy, but it was an illusion born of her own conviction. Maomao's old man told her that it wasn't just people; sometimes it even happened to animals.

Gaoshun's expression grew more and more ambivalent as Maomao explained all this.

Finally Maomao asked, "Was the young woman in fact pregnant?"

"Yes, I suppose so," he replied. She wondered at his somewhat evasive tone, but decided to ignore it for the moment.

"In that case, in what way were the women watched?" If it was remotely possible the young woman could have escaped the guards' notice, the discussion could end there.

Gaoshun took a piece of paper from the folds of his robes. It was a simple plan of the house that looked like he'd had it prepared specifically to show Maomao. The girls' annex was represented by a basic square connected to the main house by a covered gallery on the west side. To the north and east a wall surrounded the mansion, while to the south there was a garden.

"What did they do when they had to use the bathroom?"

"There were facilities in their building."

Toilets were usually located well away from where anyone lived. Maomao could only smile bitterly to realize how desperate the parents must have been to prevent their daughters from leaving.

"If they were being guarded from outside, there must have been a window. Where was it?"

"The building had only a single entrance, on the west side. But it had two windows, one on the east wall and one on the south. There were no other ways in or out." Gaoshun took out a portable writing set and drew a couple of circles to mark where the windows were.

"Were the guards stationed around here, then?" Maomao pointed to the main building. There were only so many places from which the windows of the sisters' building would have been visible. Most likely the guards had been stationed at high vantage points so as to be able to see down into the separate structure.

Gaoshun appeared to confirm her suspicions by adding two more marks, Xs this time. He added, however, that the guard to the south was on the third floor of the main building, while the one to the east was on the first floor. The

wall on the east side left too many blind spots, making the first floor the only place from which the room was visible.

Maomao traced paths between the Xs and Os with her fingers. “The view from this window is quite limited,” she remarked.

“Yes. But the women often spent entire afternoons sitting by it doing embroidery.”

With no real opportunities for entertainment, they threw themselves into their hobby, and it was better to do it by the window rather than to have a light burning in the middle of the day. Easier for the guards too.

Hmm. Maomao thought it over. She stole a glance at Gaoshun—he looked impassive, but she couldn’t shake the sense that he was avoiding her eyes. This, she suspected, was related to a feature of the story that bothered her. The chief lady-in-waiting sitting with them seemed to have noticed it as well.

“It’s an odd choice of pastime, embroidery,” Hongniang said. She, unlike Maomao, had been raised in high society.

“Yes; the family comes from a line of shepherds.”

Was it Maomao’s imagination, or did Gaoshun not sound quite natural as he said this? It was like he was reciting from a prepared script.

“I see,” Hongniang said. Among some minority groups, specific embroidery patterns could have special significance. In that case, it would be a less perplexing hobby.

Even so, something still nagged at Maomao. She took another, closer look at the plan of the complex. It included the rooms of the house, and it appeared that the two windows of the annex, south and east, were in a single large room, in addition to which there were two bedrooms.

“Was the separate building originally built to accommodate guests?” she asked.

“Well deduced,” Gaoshun replied.

“And how many guards were there?”

“Two,” he answered patiently. He seemed to know an awful lot about the situation, Maomao thought—he would have to, to prepare a plan like this. Yet she felt like he was leaving out a vital piece of the puzzle. Without it, Maomao could only offer the vaguest of answers.

Hmm... She scratched her chin, torn between pressing the point and not saying anything.

As if to give her a little extra push, Gaoshun produced something else.

“Master Jinshi sends this, with his apologies. It seems your ox bezoar will take longer than expected to arrive.”

It was true; Jinshi hadn’t yet given her the precious *calculus bovis*. She’d refrained from asking about it, concerned it might earn her another headbutt, but it certainly was taking a while.

“I must apologize,” Gaoshun said. “It seems demand has risen sharply just recently.”

“Why in the world would that be?” Maomao said. Gaoshun refused to look at her.

It was Hongniang who let it slip as she took a sip of tea: “I heard that a great many people have come to Master Jinshi with extraordinary and precious medicines of late. Somehow, a rumor got started that he’s become a passionate collector of them.” She could be just as firm-handed with a man (now that she knew he was married) as she was with any of the ladies-in-waiting. Or perhaps she was trying to send a message: *Don’t string along one of our ladies with rewards that never materialize.* Whatever the case, Gaoshun looked pained.

“Perhaps he should accept at least one of those invitations to dinner,” Hongniang said. He must get them, from men and women both—and they were unlikely to end at dinner. Being gorgeous had its own challenges.

“All right, fine,” Maomao said, taking the paper packet but distinctly annoyed.

The packet contained something that looked like a dried persimmon. Hongniang’s face twisted when she saw it, but as for Maomao, her all-too-rarely-used tear ducts began to open. She blinked rapidly, then slowly looked at Gaoshun.

“You seem pleased; that’s what really matters,” he said. “It’s bear gall. Master Jinshi wished he could give it to you in person, but it wasn’t possible.” Jinshi, it seemed, was simply too busy. When it came to precious medical ingredients like this, though, Maomao didn’t care who they came from.

Bear gall was, as its name implied, the dried gallbladder of a bear. It had a bitter flavor but was highly valued for medication relating to the digestive tract. Seeing the way Maomao’s face lit up, Gaoshun couldn’t restrain a smile. The stiff, formal eunuch was starting to understand the way to Maomao’s heart.

“Did you notice anything unusual?” Gaoshun asked.

When he asked her so directly, Maomao felt she had to say something. She tucked the paper packet carefully into the folds of her robe, then settled in her chair. “Please wait just a moment, sir,” she said, then went to her room. When she came back, she placed a small brass plate on the table along with two nuts. Two dolls would have been better, but Maomao had never been interested in girlish things like that.

She placed the nuts in front of the window on the plan. “A question,” she said. “Were the young women always watched by the same people?”

“Basically, yes.”

“And those people were always in the same places?”

“That’s right.”

“Then would you happen to remember exactly what kind of embroidery the young women were doing?”

“I’m told both of them stitched animals. Lions and rabbits, mostly.”

Still a bit surprised by Gaoshun’s detailed knowledge of the situation, Maomao placed the brass plate—which she usually used as a mirror—by the eastern window. She moved one of the nuts and crouched so she could look directly at the metal. When she had the mirror in the right spot, she said to Gaoshun, “Try looking into the mirror from right here.”

He did as she said, kneeling to see into the mirror. What he should be seeing was the other nut.

“I suspect that from this position, you couldn’t see much more than the wall in a mirror. From up close it might be another matter, but from a distance, you wouldn’t know the difference. That of course assumes there was a large enough mirror in the annex, and that the window hid any frame around such a mirror.”

Such a large mirror would be extremely valuable; and in order for anyone to take the things reflected in it as real, simple brass wouldn’t cut it. As luck would have it, Maomao had recently seen just the kind of exquisite mirror that would be necessary.

“You’re saying that there was only one young woman in the room, and what the guard was seeing was her reflection in the mirror?”

Maomao nodded. If the two sisters looked enough alike, telling them apart from a distance would be difficult. Even if they’d been given differently colored accessories to help distinguish them, the remaining woman would

simply tie one to each of her arms in different colors, and it would be hard to know who she was.

Hongniang, however, was perplexed by this. She seemed uncommonly involved today—the tale apparently interested her. “What about the embroidery, then?” she asked. “They must have been working on different patterns, mustn’t they?”

“Suppose it was a pattern like this,” Maomao said. She borrowed the brush from Gaoshun and sketched the face of a laughing person. Then she turned it upside down: it immediately transformed from a laughing person to an angry one. A picture that changed depending on the perspective from which it was viewed; a simple trick.

Hongniang was obviously startled. Maomao said, “I suspect the pattern simply appeared reversed in the mirror.”

“I see...” Gaoshun said. If there appeared to be two women near the window, the guards would focus on them, making it just possible to slip out the west side.

Gaoshun and Hongniang seemed convinced, but Maomao was still thinking. It wasn’t actually that unusual for highborn girls to pass the time with stitching. It wasn’t the custom of this land, though; it was more common among women from the west. Her father had told her it was quite typical of the country where he’d studied, for example.

Then she considered how the envoys from a far land had brought large mirrors, with workmanship fine enough to cause the kind of confusion involved in this situation. Gaoshun had said that a daughter of a respectable household had slipped out and gotten herself pregnant, but Maomao doubted the complete truth of his story. Had the woman been carrying a child—or some deeper secret? It wasn’t unusual for those suspected of spying to be treated as honored guests.

Maomao, though, wasn’t so uncouth as to pry further; instead, she gently squeezed the folds of her robe where she’d stashed the bear gall.

Now, how shall I use this little pretty? she thought to herself. She entertained the possibility that it might be, in effect, “hush bear gall.” But that didn’t stop her from savoring the thought of what she might do with it.

Chapter 8: The Moon Spirit

Rumors can have long tails, and the farther and wider they spread, the more they diverge from reality. Sometimes they cease to be rumors entirely. These expanded stories become shared lore or even myths.

This fact was something Maomao was currently learning on a very personal level. Jinshi, on one of his regular visits to the Jade Pavilion, was at this moment asking her about just such a rumor-turned-legend...

“Do you know the story of the otherworldly beauty who was said to have wept tears of pearl?” he asked, his face absolutely serious. Consort Gyokuyou had to force back a laugh. You just never knew what he was going to say next.

Maomao wanted to reply that she was looking at an otherworldly beauty right this moment, but she refrained. The story the gorgeous eunuch was alluding to was quite an old one. It was said that long ago, there had been a woman in the pleasure district more beautiful than anyone, as lovely as a moon spirit. Did she know, he was asking, who it might have been?

And why was he asking this? Well:

“It’s a personal request from the visiting embassy.”

The envoy’s great-grandfather, it seemed, had passed down stories of a radiant woman in a far land, and interest in this character had never left the envoy. The request was profoundly difficult—indeed virtually impossible—but for this honored diplomatic guest they were obliged to make every attempt they could. Hence Jinshi had come to Maomao, with her knowledge of the pleasure district, to see if she might know of whom the story spoke.

“I understand, of course, that the story is from decades ago,” Jinshi said. “This woman must be elderly at best. Who knows if she’s even still alive?”

“Oh, she’s alive,” Maomao said flatly. Jinshi looked at her, his mouth slightly agape. Gaoshun looked likewise, but Consort Gyokuyou’s eyes were sparkling. Hongniang (naturally) let out a sigh at her mistress’s excessive interest.

Yes, Maomao knew the story of an otherworldly beauty who had tears of

pearl. She knew it very well.

"So the story is true?!" Jinshi said.

"True? Sir, you've met her yourself."

Jinshi had been to the Verdigris House—Maomao's home, as it were—and he would certainly have seen her: smoking her pipe, relentlessly sizing up everyone who came anywhere near the establishment. A cunning old lady...

Jinshi and Gaoshun looked at each other, mildly aghast. They could think of only one person who fit that description. The old madam.

Time is a cruel thing: every woman's looks fade with it, no matter how beautiful she once was; her heart grows desolate and she becomes obsessed with money.

Gyokuyou's eyes were still gleaming, but maybe it would be better if she didn't hear this.

"I'm sure she would come running if the price was high enough," Maomao said. "What do you think?"

There was an awkward beat before Jinshi replied, "I'm not quite sure that would work." It was more than a problem of shattering someone's long-cherished dream. At this point it could practically turn into a diplomatic crisis. If the request was for an ethereally beautiful woman, they couldn't produce a dried prune.

Jinshi had to know perfectly well that the madam as she was now would not be satisfactory—but he must have thought Maomao would have some answer.

"Surely they understand that time passes," Maomao said. "And surely they've been received in proper style already."

"About that..." Jinshi told her that many beautiful women had already been summoned and a banquet held, but the other party had shown no sign of satisfaction. In fact, snorting laughter had been the only response.

Who would do *that?* Maomao thought. Even acknowledging that the east and the west might have different standards of beauty, she felt the women here ought to be suitably impressive.

"If you'll forgive my asking, perhaps we could send someone to him at night?"

Hongniang scowled at her bluntness, but from a diplomatic perspective, that was one way to address the issue.

“I don’t think that would work either,” Jinshi said, scratching the back of his head and frowning. “The envoy in question is a woman, you see.”

Ah. Now she understood what he was struggling with.

After that, the story really began to come out: the high official in charge of receiving the diplomatic mission had come to Jinshi practically in tears. It was hard enough trying to chase the ghost of a beautiful woman, but they were doing it *for* another woman. And a member of the same sex was always going to be the harshest possible judge.

As far as it went, Jinshi had the looks to entrance anyone at all, though he was in fact a man. He had everything necessary to ensnare virtually anyone. One could practically think that Jinshi himself had been born for this very moment. But imagine all the trouble it could bring down on him. Suppose the other party fell in love with him and made *him* a condition of any diplomatic deals. With this eunuch, it wasn’t beyond imagining. Or suppose they demanded a nocturnal visit from him—he didn’t have the necessary equipment. Maybe a woman wouldn’t be as given to such games, but regardless, an ounce of prevention...

“And this emissary, is she really important enough for all this?”

“Perhaps you’d understand if I said she holds the trade junction between the west and the north.”

Maomao nodded. She did understand. It would also explain why the caravan had been of such a stupendous scale this time: everyone involved was hoping to open new trade. They would also be trying to feel each other out. This nation’s territory possessed a wide variety of resources, and one occasionally heard rumors to the effect that some of the raids conducted by the barbarian tribes were instigated by other countries.

That might seem to leave the emissary’s country perched precariously in the middle, yet it had gone centuries without being conquered by any other nation. There was a reason for that. This country, which as a trade hub saw a great deal of intermarriage, was supposed to be overflowing with handsome men and beautiful women. Traveling merchants claimed that even the mud-spattered farmers digging up potatoes in the dirt could have been all-conquering beauties in another land.

So what did the old lady do? Maomao wondered. If someone from a place like that had come away convinced that she was a spirit of the moon, then she

must have been quite a sight indeed.

"Perhaps we could mix a hallucinogen in our perfume?"

"Do you do that?" Jinshi asked after a second.

"I don't, but it seems the quickest way," Maomao said calmly. Jinshi simply shook his head.

Didn't think so. That would just be another diplomatic problem waiting to happen.

"I'm grasping at straws, here," Jinshi said. "Do you have *any* information about what might have happened during that long-ago visit?"

The touch of desperation in his manner was new to her. He really was at the end of his rope. Gyokuyou covered her mouth with a folding fan and giggled. Did *she* know something?

"I'll try to find you something to grasp at, then," Maomao said, and resolved to send a letter to the Verdigris House.

Several days later, the old madam arrived with one of Jinshi's subordinates. They were in the same building where Maomao met with Lihaku. No outsider, not even a woman, was allowed to simply walk into the rear palace.

"All right, what's this drivel about?" the madam demanded, casting an appraising glance around the room. Her eyes said: *This was the best you could do?* Her movements as she entered were spry and sprightly, as if this woman, already over seventy, could easily live to be a hundred.

"They tell me you once entertained a special envoy from another country?"

"That's right. Must've been a good fifty years ago. That was two emperors back, now." The old lady smirked and began to talk.

It hadn't been that long after the then-emperor had moved the capital to its current location. This city had been built on the ruins of something older; it had the advantages of being close to the ocean and a great river. There was some resistance to suddenly turning the city, famous far and wide as a tourist destination, into the capital of the entire nation, but the change ultimately went ahead.

Because it had always been a place people gathered, there was already a pleasure quarter there. The old lady (she hadn't been so old then) had been considered one of the most prestigious courtesans in the city. Imagine: now,

she was less of a blossoming flower and more of a withered branch.

"There was no beautiful palace back then like there is now. The big shots were probably losing sleep over where to receive this envoy. Finally, they decided on some ruins that hadn't been rebuilt. There was an orchard in the area, with a nice little pond and a building nearby. I think it used to be famous—they used to hold rituals there or something."

And whom should they summon to perform but this woman, called from the pleasure district. Another dozen or so courtesans were asked to participate as well, but the madam was to be the star. Her accomplishments as a courtesan were one consideration, but the chief reason was her body. The emissary came from a land where many bloodlines had intermingled, and people of superlative physical attractiveness were plentiful. If you weren't tall and well-proportioned, people from the emissary's country might regard you as a child even if you were an adult. All the more so if you intended to get up on stage.

"All eyes were on me, and that meant I had a lot of preparing to do."

The reception was to be held in the orchard at night, and a great deal of effort was expended getting rid of any insects. But they were eliminated down to the last worm on a leaf, the madam said, so that there would be no bugs flying around at all. Every possible impediment was removed so that the view from the banquet would be as majestic as possible; even the phase of the moon was calculated.

Every possible factor was accounted for—but no matter how hard the officials worked, there are always those who are bound to get in the way.

"So the day arrives, and some prankster has had a joke with my outfit. I couldn't believe it!"

Dead bugs, she said, had been rubbed into the clothes she was supposed to wear. Even at that young age, though, the madam was unfazed by the likes of this; she hid the stains with cleverly placed accessories and a gossamer outer cloak and got on with the job. The audience praised her to the skies, and whoever had wished her ill must have been gnashing their teeth and ruing the entire situation.

"Grams, you've told me that story before. *A lot*. Isn't there anything new you can add?" Maomao fought back a tired yawn.

The madam's fist snapped her out of it. "If you think you're cute, you've got another think coming," the old woman huffed. Then she picked up a cloth

bundle by her feet and opened it on the table to reveal a drawing. It was on a piece of thick cloth stretched in a wooden frame, and it was done in rich colors rather than black ink. Moreover, it was in the western style, the colors provided not by water but by oil.

The scenery was depicted in layers of light blue; a full moon, somehow at once obscure and clear, reflected in the surface of some water. In the center of the painting was a woman with a flowing scarf. She was surrounded by delicately painted motes of light, perhaps reflections from the moon.

It was the first time Maomao had ever seen the painting. The old lady must have cherished it.

Maomao looked at the face of the beauty in the painting, then stared at the withered old woman across from her.

Then she sighed.

She looked once more at the moon spirit in the picture, then again at the dried-out, money-grubbing miser.

"Got something to say, girl?"

"Nothing at all."

She didn't have to say it for both of them to understand: time was cruel.

"Grams" composed herself and went on: "They say that the emissary commissioned this painting after he got back home, if you can believe it. He never set foot in this country again, but he sent it along with one of the caravans."

Ah... So they painted her to be more beautiful than she was.

"Did you say something?"

"Nothing at all." The old lady not only had devilishly sharp ears, but an intuition to match. "You just did the same job you always did, right, Grams? Did he really like you that much?"

"Can't say I understand it myself, but the interpreter said he called me a moon goddess or something."

Maomao didn't say anything.

"Careful the way you look at people!"

The old lady was capable of being objective. She might have been sold into courtesan's work, but she doubted she really deserved that kind of adulation.

Maomao ran a hand through her hair and pursed her lips. Even if they could produce a woman who looked exactly like the one in this painting, and

then have that person meet the diplomatic mission, it was hard to imagine they would truly be satisfied. Something would always be missing. The fact that they were trying to impress a woman this time was going to make things harder than before.

"Grams, did the visitor compliment anything specific about you at the banquet?"

"Not sure how to answer that..."

"Something. Anything."

Maomao received a smack for her trouble; she'd let her attitude get too casual. The old woman was telling her not to act too blasé when there were men around, even if they were eunuchs.

"Well, it's not a very good memory for me," the old woman said. "There was that awful prank, and then the place was *full* of bugs. It was the worst."

"Bugs?"

"That's right! They said they'd gotten rid of them all, but when you set up torches outside, insects will flock to them." She looked downright despondent.

They talked a little longer after that, but not much came of it.

In the office of the Matron of the Serving Women, Maomao showed the painting of the madam to Jinshi and Gaoshun. They could only groan.

"Shall I attempt to find someone who looks like this?" Gaoshun asked Jinshi.

"Might as well try." They had no other ideas, for the moment.

Hoping to be helpful, Maomao said, "At the time, the madam was about 175 centimeters tall."

"Rather tall," Jinshi remarked.

"Yes. Long arms and legs look especially good when performing a dance."

The madam was much smaller now than she used to be, although she was still taller than Maomao. To be quite honest, it was going to be difficult to find someone so large who also looked just like the woman in the picture.

"Might I suggest finding someone who's the right height, even if her face doesn't quite look like the picture?" Maomao said.

"Are there really that many women like that around?" Jinshi asked. Not only tall, but beautiful as well; it was a high bar.

"The envoys aren't going to be short themselves. If the woman is too

small, it will never work," Gaoshun said. He evidently agreed with Maomao's stratagem. His remark confirmed that the women of this other land were large; they might take someone of Maomao's size to be no more than a child.

Just now, though, Gaoshun had said "envoys," plural. What was that about?

"But they'll be picky about her appearance too!" Jinshi said, somewhat hotly. That made it sound like the envoys themselves were good-looking. Foreign beauties—Maomao wondered if they might look anything like Consort Gyokuyou.

The two eunuchs sat trading grimaces. Maomao stared at them.

Jinshi looked at her, puzzled. "What is it?"

"Oh, no... I was just thinking we have someone quite suited to the part."

"Who? Some courtesan from your brothel?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid there's no one tall enough at the Verdigris House."

A beauty almost two meters tall, though? Maomao could think of one. She stared hard at Jinshi. Gaoshun noticed and started doing the same. "Oh!" he said as the pieces fell into place.

There was a long beat.

"What exactly are you trying to say?" Jinshi demanded, beginning to sound irritated.

A beauty—a beautiful *person*—of 175 centimeters or more? Yes, Maomao could think of one.

Interestingly, the site of the previous banquet was on rear palace grounds. It had been all but abandoned at the time, but the rear palace had grown since then, and the area was now in use. Maomao was a little fuzzy on the history, but stories said that this land had once been inhabited by a different people group who were now gone, wiped out by infectious disease. The tribe had possessed an advanced architectural culture, and had left behind the outer walls and the sewer system that now served the rear palace.

One explanation held that when the area's current inhabitants had arrived from afar, they had brought with them the disease that had wiped out the previous population. Maomao had asked her old man about it, but he'd told her she mustn't repeat the story to outsiders. It was only a theory, after all, and certain people might not like it.

The location of the banquet, in any event, was a peach grove in the northern quarter. There was indeed a pond along with a building that looked like an old shrine. Even now, the place could easily serve as the location for a banquet.

As Maomao meandered through the area, she heard lively footsteps behind her. Turning, she found her vision dominated by a young woman leaping at her with open arms; the lady proceeded to crash into her and fall on top of her.

"Ha ha! Maomao! What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the very same question."

Maomao knew this girl; the slightly ditzy tone gave her away: it was Shisui. She was open and friendly, as one might expect of anyone who could make it as Xiaolan's gossip buddy. Maomao didn't want to speak for anyone else, but Shisui certainly seemed to be enjoying life in the rear palace.

"There was something I had to do here," Shisui replied with a smile, pointing toward the grove. The slightly unkempt stand of peach trees was bearing small fruits just then.

"You mean like get a snack?"

"No! Here." Shisui jogged over to the orchard and came back with something. "Look!"

She dropped what appeared to be a withered leaf in Maomao's palm. It was oddly heavy, though, as if something were tucked inside it. Maomao unrolled it and took a long look: sitting on the leaf was a pupa. It was a fat little bug, and cute in its way, but an insect was an insect. Maomao looked at Shisui skeptically. "Maybe you shouldn't. People usually only use these for pranks."

"What? These cute little guys?"

Maomao gave Shisui back her bug. The other woman took it as tenderly as if it were a human child and put it in an insect cage. The cage was of fine make, but heavily used; Maomao wondered where she'd gotten it.

"This place is amazing," Shisui said. "So many bugs I've never seen before."

"Oh, really?" Maomao replied flatly. She might have sounded more engaged if they had been talking about medicine. Frankly, she just didn't care about bugs as much as she did herbs.

"And this bug here, I was really amazed to find one. I'd only seen it in

books before. It comes from another country across the sea."

That other country was a place that had once sent merchants here to trade. There was always a possibility that trade goods from another place might carry with them some of the local insects. These had happened to find a congenial home in this new land and had settled in.

Maomao, her interest piqued by that information, took a fresh look at the cage. In addition to the insect Shisui had put in it a moment ago, there were several cocoons as well.

"So it's some kind of butterfly."

"No, it's a moth. They're normally nocturnal, so I guess all the grown-up moths are hiding." Shisui squatted on the ground and picked up a fallen twig from nearby, then sketched a moth with large feelers in the dirt. "They're really beautiful. They have white wings, so they shine at night."

"Huh," Maomao said. Come to think of it, the old madam had said that the insects around here had been exterminated for that banquet long ago—had that included the moths? Pretty though they might be, bugs were bugs.

"You should try coming here at night sometime, Maomao. With the moonlight drifting down over everything, it's just gorgeous. It's like you've gotten lost in a sacred peach grove."

"Spare me the hyperbole..." Maomao suddenly stopped, sprang to her feet, and inspected Shisui's insect cage again. "Tell me—these moths. Do they reproduce as soon as they come out of their cocoons?"

"Gosh, you don't mince words. I guess they must. Apparently the adults can't eat, so they die pretty quickly."

Maomao gulped heavily, then fixed Shisui with a look. "Can you tell the difference between the males and females of this species?"

"Yeah, for the most part..."

Could this be the key?

She might just have figured it out. She might know what it was that had so enchanted the emissary during the madam's dance. Recreating it would require a good deal of legwork and one sacrificial victim.

"Shisui!"

"Huh? What's going on?"

Maomao took Shisui by the shoulders and told her there was something she wanted her help with. Maomao thought to herself that her face must have been a terrible thing to behold.

The banquet was to be in five days' time. It would have been ideal to hold it even sooner, but the sudden change in location to the rear palace's northern quarter necessitated time to prepare. The idea of holding the reception in the isolated northern area naturally elicited some resistance, but when the objectors were told that this was in the interest of granting a cherished wish for their visitors, they grudgingly accepted it.

The ban on men in the rear palace was temporarily lifted in the northern quarter. Not many ladies lived there anyway, and some of the disused halls could be turned into temporary dormitories for the few days they would be there.

Now it turned out to be an especially good thing that the recent discovery of a corpse in the northern quarter had been kept quiet. It would have served no one to have unsavory rumors circulating.

What with such trouble being taken to put on this banquet, it was decided that the upper consorts might as well attend, but some measures were to be taken for the sake of modesty. They, and in fact all the attendees, would be seated not out in the open, but in modified carriages, so that they could enjoy the proceedings from behind screens that would preserve their privacy. The carriages themselves were to be arranged around the pond.

Some officials even said this might be better than an ordinary banquet; it was easy to set up bug-repelling incense in a carriage, and within its confines one could, to a certain extent, relax. The curtains would be rolled up most of the time, but having walls on three sides meant considerably less concern about who might be watching you.

The consorts were inside the carriages, but their ladies-in-waiting were outside, and it was clear that everyone's attention was focused on the place of honor, where there stood two carriages, each occupied by a golden-haired beauty with eyes the color of the clear blue sky. It was only upon seeing them that the courtiers realized there were two envoys, rather than one as had been widely assumed. While the two women looked very similar, they were neither twins nor sisters, but rather cousins, descendents of the same grandfather.

Not far away was His Majesty, flanked on either side by the upper consorts.

Now I get it, Maomao thought, her mind reaching back to Gaoshun's story

from a few days earlier.

Partly in deference to the occasion, the envoys were wearing western dress. Maomao had thought for sure they would appear in traditional western dress, but their clothes were from even farther west than that, billowing skirts cinched about the waist.

The carriages were certainly looking like a good idea for the banquet seating. Even considering that standards of beauty differed across places and times, these women were otherworldly in their loveliness. Some of the officials all but fell over themselves when they saw the visitors (whose outfits emphasized their chests), but the envoys' bodyguards gave them sharp looks to prevent them from getting any ideas.

Guess you really can't rely on less-competent officials, Maomao thought. In the matter of beauty, the upper consorts of the rear palace were certainly a match for the envoys. But the visiting ladies, with their unusual hair and eyes, had the advantage of provoking curiosity. True, there was Consort Gyokuyou, with her red hair and green eyes and the whiff of exoticism that came with being a foreign princess, but she was a known quantity. The envoys, who were completely new to everyone here, aroused much more excitement.

What was more, Jinshi had no intention of making a spectacle of the consorts; he wasn't going to let them be used to make the envoys shine in comparison. That was one reason for the screens on the carriages, not simply to hide Gyokuyou's condition.

It was possible to sense a political motivation for sending women as envoys. Being women didn't mean they were any less capable, but Maomao was exasperated at the air of superiority that one of the envoys exuded. It so happened that the Emperor's current favorite consort was also a woman with foreign blood.

Maybe the mirrors they sent the consorts were partly intended as a provocation. And that wasn't the only challenge the envoys posed: they might have come on the pretense of diplomacy, but they were also, in effect, making sure His Majesty saw them. They must have great confidence indeed in their appearance.

Why were there two of them? Some went so far as to suggest that they hoped to cast their spell not only over His Majesty, but also on the Emperor's younger brother. It was quite common for two brothers to marry two sisters.

No wonder the officials were so worked up.

Sadly for any plan the envoys might have had, the Emperor's reclusive younger brother was not in attendance at tonight's banquet.

As for Maomao, she wasn't with Consort Gyokuyou, but was making preparations elsewhere. The food-tasting was over; the guests had moved on to enjoying drinks and snacks while watching the performances.

It was the night after the full moon; there were no clouds, so the moon was reflected on the pond, as if there were one in the sky and one in the water. With the stage constructed with the pond behind it, the shimmering torches looked a bit over-the-top.

The musical performances boasted quite an orchestra: the *huqin*, the erhu, the *yangqin*, and the straight flute, along with an arrangement of gongs called a *yunluo*. There were other instruments, too, ones Maomao didn't recognize. Most musical performances in this land featured relatively few instruments, but they seemed to have gone all out for the visitors.

Sword dances, skits, and other entertainments were performed along with the music. Maomao stole a glance at the envoys. Both were laughing, but while their faces resembled each other, the one on the right appeared almost contemptuous in her amusement.

Maybe she's saying this isn't exactly what she'd hoped for. Maomao didn't think that the envoy had come here expecting to see the lady who had so enchanted her great-grandfather; she probably didn't believe there was any woman in the world more beautiful than herself. In fact, she was overheard to say it was "a shame" that the upper consorts were to be seated in carriages and hidden by screens. (Let's not mention exactly why she thought it was a shame.) Maomao could see the other envoy's face darken at that.

Both of the women spoke the language of Maomao's country, but the calmer and more composed envoy had less of an accent than her companion, who seemed to keep her speech to a minimum, as if afraid she might say something she shouldn't.

A few moments earlier, the prideful-looking envoy had leaned out of her carriage. The servants nearby had scrambled to offer their hands, but she had refused and had exited the carriage herself. She was wearing high heels and a long skirt, which excited much murmuring among the onlookers, but she appeared supremely confident, not remotely perturbed by the chattering. She was used to this. The way she walked almost seemed meant for display.

"Good evening, sire." The murmuring only intensified as the woman stopped, of all places, directly in front of His Majesty's carriage, where she curtsied slowly, her sculpted features appearing to glow in the moonlight. Her skin seemed so pale it might be translucent, and the gold of her hair shone. "Here you are seated so far from us though you have put out this lovely banquet. One could wish you were a lit*tle* closer to us, that we might *con*verse."

Despite her slight accent, she spoke quite smoothly—a perfectly respectable command of the language for a diplomat. The Emperor's bodyguards seemed at a loss for what to do. When he saw the envoy take a polite step back, however, the Emperor appeared to decide she had no malicious intent, and instructed his guards to stand down.

Yikes, look at this, Maomao thought, glancing at the carriages of the four ladies that flanked that of the Emperor. She almost thought she could *see* the trouble brewing. Consort Lishu might not factor into this episode, but she could only imagine what Gyokuyou and Lihua were thinking. She wasn't sure how Loulan might feel about this, but to approach His Majesty so boldly was nothing if not indecorous. *Geez, this is giving me the willies...*

Hongniang was standing outside Gyokuyou's carriage, her face tight. Her pride as chief lady-in-waiting refused to let her appear anything but composed, but secretly she probably wanted to grind her teeth and clench her fists.

The envoy slowly approached His Majesty's carriage, looking coquettish. She was stopped—not by the guards, or the Emperor, or any of the consorts, but by the other envoy.

"I think it's time you came back and sat down," the other woman said gently. "They've gone to all this trouble to put on a lovely performance for us. The least you could do is enjoy it." Though they wore similar outfits, the calm envoy had a blue hair ornament, while the other woman wore a red one.

The woman with the red accessory looked less than pleased, but the envoy with the blue accessory whispered something in her ear and she was finally induced to go back to her carriage.

I wonder what she said, Maomao thought. She was feeling anxious. She thought she understood now why the other country had sent two envoys. To her, though, it didn't matter what gender the envoys were, or how many of them there might be, or why they were here. Her priority now was to do her

job successfully.

She entered the building and spoke to someone inside. “How’s it going?”

“We’ve done all that we could.” The answer came not from the person Maomao had spoken to, but from Gaoshun. His eyes looked oddly vacant, and his face was pale, as if he’d seen something that ought not to exist in this world.

Maomao looked inside. When she saw the figure within, she felt the blood drain from her own face. Yes, she knew quite well now why Gaoshun looked so disturbed. Standing there was something that ought not to exist in this world. Something that might have stopped the heart of someone with less grit than Maomao. “I think the banquet will be ending soon,” she said.

“Very well,” Gaoshun said, placing a dark cloth over the figure standing inside, as Maomao had instructed. She heard a bell ring, whereupon she took the figure’s hand.

“Let’s go, then,” she said, and headed toward the stage.

The guests of honor would be the first to leave when the banquet was over. Because the seats were also carriages, the guests didn’t have to go anywhere; the carriages would simply start moving. As they began to roll away, music floated through the air. Everyone else was obliged to keep their places until the guests of honor were out of sight.

The carriage wheels clattered along. Maomao guided the figure in the dark cloth between the peach grove and the pond. The other carriages faced the pond, their view of this spot obscured by bobbing willow trees. Only the envoys could see Maomao and the figure. They weren’t going to intercept the envoys’ carriages; they would simply happen to be on the roadside as the guests passed by. They just had to stand by the orchard—no problem at all.

The envoys noticed Maomao and the figure. Just as they were about to dismiss them as nothing more than a couple of maids, Maomao pulled off the dark cloth.

Black hair, tied up in two loops and crowned with a pearl-studded tiara, floated through the night sky. A hair stick gleamed on one side of the figure’s head, a hairpin glinted on the other, and the hair that wasn’t tied up on the figure’s head cascaded down the back.

The figure’s lips were thin, but shone red, and their long eyebrows led down toward almond-shaped eyes accented in green; between those willow-branch brows was an elegant flower mark. The trailing hem of their outfit—a

white dress with long sleeves and the neck cinched shut—danced in the wind. The figure seemed to have appeared out of the moonlight.

Maomao tried to study the reactions of the envoys without looking up. They seemed startled; she could see the color of their eyes even in the faint moonlight. Perhaps they saw someone with perfectly ordinary black hair and black eyes. Yet although such features were quite common in this country, the person before them now was a beauty from whom it was impossible to look away.

Maomao, her head still bowed, dropped the black cloth on the ground. At the same moment, she squeezed the figure's hand. She couldn't be sure, but she thought the silhouette in the envoy's carriage started. If the woman in the next carriage back could see this, chances were she was having the same reaction. Simply looking at this figure was enough to make you feel like your heart was in a vice, like it might burst at any moment. As if you had been violently poisoned.

The guards were likewise frozen, but the carriage continued to roll slowly forward. They'd arranged this with the driver ahead of time—found someone who was largely immune to these sorts of things and ordered them strictly not to look. On a straight, clear road, they could probably drive a good ten seconds with their eyes closed.

Maomao wasn't sure she approved of the way the guards let themselves be stupefied, but she knew Gaoshun and the others were ready to rush out should anything happen.

In the midst of all this, it began.

A scarf fluttered, and faintly glowing lights drifted closer. The beautiful person walked forward, the white dress seeming to float. Maomao made to release the figure's hand, but she felt them catch her fast.

That son of a...

Maomao was left with no choice but to walk alongside, trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible. The second carriage was already passing by, the second envoy making a very similar face to the first.

Each time the scarf billowed, the number of pale, floating lights grew. Sometimes they would settle on the figure's tiara or shoulders, multiplying all the while.

The carriages didn't stop. Maomao knew the bodyguards were looking their way, astonished, but so long as the envoys remained in their vehicles,

the guards could do no more than look.

Dozens, hundreds, of tiny lights surrounded Maomao and the figure with its inhuman beauty. The carriages stopped in front of the pond, and the envoys leaned out toward them. At that point, the figure finally let go of Maomao's hand and she quietly withdrew.

The beautiful figure stood there waving the scarf against a background of bobbing willow trees, dancing lights, and the moon reflected on the water.

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This, perhaps, was what the envoys' great-grandfather had seen all those years ago. Those present could hardly believe the figure was of this world. It was as if one of the celestial nymphs had lost her way and descended to earth, and the distant whistling of the flute sounded like the music of the heavenly realm.

As everyone watched, the beauty raised their hand. Their red lips curved into a smile more alluring than anyone had ever seen. The wind caught the scarf, and the willow branches shook as if to conceal the nymph. The motes of light went everywhere.

At that instant a bronze gong sounded the end of the music, and a shower of blossoms came raining down. No sooner did the onlookers wonder where the petals had come from than the nymph was gone. The white scarf fluttered slowly to the ground, and the lights drifted away.

One of the envoys got out of her carriage, wondering what had happened. She must have been the more, uh, proactive one.

I knew this would be a problem, Maomao thought. They should have gotten out while the getting was good.

The envoy spotted Maomao and cornered her. She was almost a head taller than the diminutive palace woman, and her sharp facial features gave her an imposing beauty. She was speaking quickly, amidst a flurry of gestures. She was clearly asking after the vanished nymph, but in her excitement she had slipped into her native tongue.

Maomao simply pointed upward, toward the moon hanging in the sky. She waited a beat, and then she said the name of the goddess spoken of in that far western land. She wasn't sure if her pronunciation was quite correct, but her point seemed to get across. The envoy's jaw dropped, and it was like some glittering thing inside her had been crushed into dust.

The other envoy came over and took the agitated woman by the shoulders. Maomao bowed her head slowly, then turned and left as if nothing at all had happened.

"Things seem to have gone well," said Gaoshun, who was waiting in the building on the far side of the pond. He was with several other officials, each of them holding insect cages containing a slew of large moths, their wings not quite blue and not quite green—the same ones whose caterpillars Shisui had been collecting.

With her help, Maomao had spent the intervening days getting ahold of as many of these insects as they could find. Not the larvae, but every adult and even every cocoon that looked like it might soon hatch. No effort had been made to exterminate the insects in the peach grove this time, either, so there had been even more of them than she'd expected.

Maomao remembered the painting the old madam had shown her, filled with dots of pale light. This was the truth behind them.

That's a coincidence if there ever was one.

The old lady said she had been the victim of a prank, and she'd also said there had been a huge number of bugs. The prank had allegedly involved grinding the dead insects into her clothes.

Some bugs use a special smell to attract members of the opposite sex, a fact Maomao had been known to take advantage of when collecting them for medicinal ingredients. She suspected the insects rubbed into the madam's clothing had been females, and the ones that had flocked around her had been males. The old lady, Maomao was sure, had gone to the edge of the pond and had been waving her scarf trying to drive off the insects. Nothing more than that. But to at least one observer, she had looked like an ethereal moon spirit cloaked in light.

Coincidence can be a force to be reckoned with, though.

It was this event that had cemented the madam's status within the pleasure district. Who could have guessed that the prank would backfire so spectacularly?

Thus, Maomao had leaned on Shisui to find the female bugs among their collection, and had used their odor to perfume the clothing. Shisui had been quite helpful all around, in fact; Maomao would have to find a way to thank her.

It was obvious what would happen when a whole crowd of the male moths congregated around the smell of the females. What this transcendent effect would do to someone who was already breathtakingly beautiful. And under a near-full moon, no less. It put her in mind of the "hibiscus under the stars."

"Yes, I would say so. Was this what you wanted?" Maomao looked at the carriages across the pond. The envoys were gone, and the other banquet attendees were slowly trickling away. It had taken no small effort to set things up so they wouldn't see anything. That moment, after all, wasn't

something everyone should witness. It might render some people gibbering wrecks, never again able to do their jobs.

It could, just possibly, bring the country to its knees.

"I did what you told me," came a voice laced with annoyance. It was Jinshi, wrapped in a cloth and soaking wet. He'd let his hair down, leaving it looking rather unusual.

His performance had been exceptional. Then he'd had to work his way from one side of the pond to the other, underwater, wearing heavy clothing. It must have demanded substantial physical strength.

As for exactly what they had done, perhaps you'd be so kind as not to inquire further.

"We've done all we can. However it turns out, I hardly care." Jinshi was rubbing his face, producing a red splotch of rouge on his handkerchief. "My hair is *still* wet!" He sounded a bit put out. Normally the solicitous old lady Suiren would have helped dry it for him, but she wasn't here.

Gaoshun looked steadily at Maomao. He was always trying to get her to handle things; it was such a headache. At that moment, though, all the other officials present were looking at her too. She wished they wouldn't regard her with such pity.

Let him dry his own hair! she thought, but finally she took a fresh towel and began wiping Jinshi's head.

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Chapter 9: The Clinic

There were always plenty of dark stories to go around in the world, Maomao thought as she sat on a wooden box behind the laundry area.

Xiaolan wasn't coming today, and there wouldn't have been much for Maomao to do if she'd gone back to the Jade Pavilion, so she was killing some time here. The "institute of practical studies" was beginning to get underway, and Xiaolan was among those who would go down in history as its first students.

Maomao considered going to the medical office to bum some snacks off the quack doctor, but thought better of it. He'd been busy ever since the recent commotion.

The commotion in question had to do with the matter of the perfume oil. The special envoys' visit had all but driven it from her mind, but it hadn't been entirely resolved yet. As part of the investigation, Jinshi had gone around to all the various consorts and discovered their ladies-in-waiting had all bought copious amounts of perfume.

It's hard to blame them, Maomao thought. It was a trade good that had come from a far land across deserts, oceans, and mountains. Practically calculated to inflame the fascination of a bunch of young women who lived like birds in a cage. Maomao couldn't pretend she was different: if she'd been confronted with a stall full of exotic medicines from the west, she would have borrowed money from the old madam herself to buy some.

Not all of the perfumes were dangerous, but they couldn't leave the ones that were lying about, even in small amounts. So, although it felt like a waste, the perfume had been disposed of. There was too much of it available—true, no one bottle held very much, but put them all together and they could make quite a potent poison.

The question then became: who had brought it here?

I can't vouch for the perfume and spices, but... She knew that the merchants had brought the upper consorts clothes suitable for a pregnant woman. It was possible that one of the envoys' goals in coming here had

been to worm their way into the consorts' ranks. That seemed unlikely to be their nation's primary objective, but the haughty envoy had certainly appeared to believe she was capable of it. Sadly for her, she'd been left with her pride in tatters; Maomao had heard that after the banquet, she even spoke less in meetings.

It was conceivable that the perfume was also their doing, but one mustn't rush to conclusions. There were currently four upper consorts in the rear palace: Gyokuyou, Lihua, Lishu, and Loulan. Gyokuyou had the best part of the Emperor's affections, followed perhaps by Lihua. It was said that several of the middle-ranking consorts had also been His Majesty's bedmates. As for the lower consorts, rumor had it that His Majesty didn't see much of them; until recently, they'd been kept in line by the jealousy of one of the other consorts.

Loulan seemed like the consort His Majesty would most have to pay attention to, though, given how powerful her father was.

Hmm... Maomao grabbed a stick and sketched an orchid—the *lan* of *Loulan*—in the dirt.

In terms of powerful parents, Lihua ranked next, though this was only because they were the Emperor's maternal relatives; the family had never risen all that far in the world. Maomao followed the orchid with a fruit, for *Lihua* meant "pear blossom."

In fact, it was Lishu's family that had been on the rise over the past few generations, so ambitious that they had offered the previous emperor their young daughter for a wife. The *shu* of *Lishu* meant "tree," so that's what Maomao drew next in her row of symbols.

Gyokuyou's family was based at a trade junction in the west. They appeared to make a good deal of money from commerce, but they were close to the border and in fact paid much of what they made in taxes to sustain the national defense. On top of that, the land wasn't good for farming, so the place wasn't particularly abundant.

The last picture Maomao drew was a leaf, for Gyokuyou, "the jewel leaf."

There had been a poisoning attempt at one of the garden party banquets held the year before, caused by one of the ladies-in-waiting of the former consort Ah-Duo acting on her own initiative. The motive had had nothing to do with seizing power, but rather had been deeply human. Maomao understood that much—but it left her wondering who had been behind the

earlier attempted poisoning of Consort Gyokuyou.

There was a good chance it had been the middle consort, the subject of the recent mushroom incident. Where had she learned about that poison, though? They used silver dishware, so it presumably wasn't arsenic-based.

The result had been that Consort Gyokuyou reduced her staff of ladies-in-waiting by half; the woman who had been poisoned instead of the consort was still suffering the aftereffects.

It all made Maomao feel a little queasy. She recognized the sensation. It made her think of Suirei, a palace woman who'd had the wherewithal to fake her own death in order to escape. They still didn't know where exactly she was or what had happened to her. Nor did they know what her objective had been. Why she had targeted Jinshi.

Maomao idly drew circles around her four sketches. Then she gave up thinking about it entirely. *What good will it do me, anyway?* She was just a lady-in-waiting. A food taster, a disposable pawn.

She decided she needed a change of scenery. There were plenty of gardens in the rear palace, set up to delight the Emperor. There were pine groves, bamboo forests, and fruit orchards.

I guess cherry season is just about over, she thought. Three months ago, she might have been able to score some bamboo shoots, but thanks to a certain monocled jerk, she'd spent that season tending roses in the Crystal Pavilion. It raised her hackles just thinking of him.

Gah, stop! Got to stop this. Her steps grew lighter just thinking about taking a little walk, but on her way to the cherry orchard she happened to meet the gaze of some women from the Crystal Pavilion. She recognized them, so she bowed slightly; they scrunched up their faces and ran away. One of them had tiny feet, suggesting they'd been bound, but she put on a remarkable turn of speed, leaving Maomao impressed in spite of herself.

Drama queens. All I did was tear off their clothes.

It happened all the time at the brothels: no sooner had a woman with a bit of life experience knocked on a door in the pleasure district than they were stripping her down and sizing her up. People always thought that younger women brought the highest prices, but the trend these days was for knowledge over youth. The wife of an official, fallen from grace, could bring a surprisingly hefty amount. The fact that she would already have had some education meant the initial investment would be low, and there were men out

there who in fact liked a woman who had been someone's wife—a distasteful preference.

It wasn't as if Maomao had grabbed the ladies' dresses out of sheer perversity. She'd just assumed all the ladies of the Crystal Pavilion, voracious consumers of fashion that they were, would have bought the perfume oil, and when she found out some of them hadn't, she'd been so surprised that she felt compelled to make sure. But it had only earned her a scolding from a beautiful eunuch.

Eh, I guess I shouldn't be surprised if at least one of them passed on the perfume. There were a lot of women at the Crystal Pavilion, including no fewer than ten ladies-in-waiting and no fewer than thirty maids dedicated to the building. Maomao didn't give it any further thought, but continued on to go pick some cherries.

That evening, the ladies-in-waiting of the Jade Pavilion were having an early dinner.

"I'm feeling a little tired today," Ailan said, half-slumped on the table. Maomao put a hand to her forehead to find that she was indeed a touch feverish.

"Don't go getting a cold! What if Lady Gyokuyou catches it?" Yinghua asked as she took another cherry. She wondered where they had come from, but she happened to like cherries, so she decided not to investigate too closely. The cherries were, of course, a secret from Hongniang.

"I was being careful!" Ailan said, now looking annoyed as well as tired.

Maomao was just about to go to her room to mix up a cold remedy when Yinghua stopped her. "Sorry for the trouble, but if you're going to make up some medicine, do you think you could take her to the clinic afterward?"

"The clinic?" Maomao asked, puzzled. Did she mean the medical office? Taking her there only seemed likely to tire her out more.

Yinghua must have guessed what Maomao was thinking, because she shook her head. "It's not the medical office. It's...hmm. There's no doctor there, but there's someone else to care for people. Anyway, Ailan knows where it is. Just go with her."

Maomao nodded.

The clinic, whatever that meant, was located in the northern quarter of the

rear palace. Behind some laundry facilities was a separate building populated by palace women in white outfits.

Oh yeah. I guess I was vaguely aware of this place.

Maomao had spent a fair amount of time tromping through the groves and copses of the northern quarter, but had rarely gone to any of its actual buildings. Ailan smiled at her, coughing as she said, "I'm sure they mentioned it when you first got here. You don't remember?"

Unfortunately, Maomao had been dragged here against her will and hadn't been paying all that much attention to what she was told. They'd given her some kind of lecture on the way over, but she was sure she must have been more interested in the mugwort growing by the side of the road or something. That was just the way she was.

The laundry area nearby was bustling with palace women doing washing. They seemed to be working with sheets of some kind.

Logical, Maomao thought. Easy access to a laundry area meant clothes and bedding could be washed quickly. A good location for a medical facility where cleanliness was paramount.

"Pardon me. I seem to have caught a cold," Ailan said to one of the ladies. The woman, who looked busy, cast a quick, suspicious eye on her, but then set down her basket of laundry and placed her hand to Ailan's forehead.

"Slight fever. Stick out your tongue." The woman's voice was full of age and experience, her cheeks deeply wrinkled. She was middle-aged, a rare thing in the rear palace. She squinted at Ailan's tongue, then pulled down her lower eyelids. She looked far more practiced at it than the quack doctor.

"Hmm," she said. "Doesn't look too bad. Try not to overwork yourself for two or three days and you'll be fine. How would you like to handle it?" The woman's diagnosis was spot on.

"I have to avoid giving this to the consort. Would you let me stay here? Just to be safe."

"Hmm," the woman said again. Then she picked up her basket and strode into the clinic, where she set the basket down and motioned them over.

Inside, the clinic was stark and unadorned, but not in an elegant way. The pillars were undecorated, and the hallways boasted only wooden floors. The windows consisted of nothing more than square holes.

All this simplicity had an obvious advantage, though: the less elaborate the place was, the easier it would be to clean. The many windows let plenty

of air in. It looked like it would be a very pleasant place to spend the upcoming season.

One thing Maomao didn't notice in the clinic was the distinctive smell of medicine; instead, she got a good whiff of alcohol.

Ailan was frowning. Apparently, she didn't like the smell, and that was why she hadn't wanted to come here. Maomao, though, was impressed; to her, the odor said the place was kept thoroughly clean. A strong alcohol could eliminate toxins in and around wounds, and everyone knew that putting some in your mouth and spitting it out was one method of sterilization. Maomao had always wondered how the rear palace avoided outbreaks of disease with no one but that quack to care for it—this explained it.

"Okay, let everyone know I'll be back tomorrow," Ailan said.

"All right," Maomao said.

The middle-aged woman gave Ailan a wooden tag with a number on it, and she headed to the room with that number. Maomao looked around the clinic with keen interest until she found herself grabbed by the scruff of the neck. It was the same way they grabbed the kitten in the medical office.

"Time for you to get back to work. Don't think you can slack off just because you had to bring your friend here."

Maomao didn't respond.

"What's that?" the middle-aged woman said, grinning. "You say you'll stay and wash all the laundry here?"

Maomao shook her head vigorously. In the end, she was left with no choice but to go back to the Jade Pavilion. She couldn't win with these older women. The madam had taught her that.

Maomao trotted back to the Jade Pavilion. She'd so wanted to see more of the clinic, but it obviously wasn't going to happen. As she walked along, women with laundry baskets hurried past her. It rained off and on this time of year, so the ladies had their hands full doing all the washing they could whenever there was a break in the clouds. Come to think of it, Maomao realized, she would need to go get the laundry later too.

Still, I can't help noticing...

The woman who'd kicked her out of the clinic wasn't the only more mature lady there; all the women she saw were comparatively advanced in age. The rear palace being what it was, as they got older, women were

virtually forced out and replaced. In general, you could expect to be shown the door before you were thirty years old; anyone who was still there after that must occupy a higher position, like the Matron of the Serving Women, or otherwise be a lady-in-waiting to one of the consorts. Hongniang, for example, ought to have found herself ejected from the palace long ago, although to say so out loud would be to invite a slap.

Judging by how practiced the ladies of the clinic seemed at their work, Maomao guessed they'd been allowed to remain because they served a vital function in the rear palace. She wondered, though, about the fact that the place hadn't smelled of medicine at all. Had the smell of alcohol simply overpowered it? Or...

Maomao walked along, stroking her chin in thought, when she ran smack into something with a *thump!* She thought maybe she'd bumped into a pillar, until she realized a countenance like a heavenly nymph's was shining above her like the sun.

"You shouldn't walk along muttering to yourself. You'll trip."

"I was muttering?"

Jinshi heaved a sigh, spreading his hands and shaking his head. The clear show of exasperation rankled Maomao, and she was about to give him a look like he was an earthworm floating in a puddle when she saw Gaoshun, his face calm as a Bodhisattva's. She managed to force her narrowed eyes open.

"Do you need anything, sir?" she asked.

"No, nothing. We just happened to run into each other and I talked to you. Was that wrong?" Jinshi looked a tad startled. Gaoshun appeared to be silently trying to tell her something, but she was very sorry to say she didn't know what it was.

"Where were you coming from?" Jinshi asked, his shoulders slumped a bit.

"The clinic. So that's where it was."

"I told the palace women to show it to you when you got here. Surely they didn't forget?"

"Certainly not." Maomao, noticing the unusually serious expression on Jinshi's face, wondered what she should do. The eunuch wasn't having a crisis of confidence about his work, was he? He always seemed so sure of himself.

Jinshi guided them to a quiet side street. Considering how simply standing

there, the gorgeous eunuch could draw enough of a crowd to get in the way of work, it was probably a wise choice.

"I was impressed with how well the place was run," Maomao said. "Frankly, I think we could afford to make *that* the medical office." Hrm, but then again, if they did that, the doctor would lose his head, and Maomao would lose a convenient place to slack off. She was about to correct herself when she realized Jinshi's eyebrows were furrowed again.

"Make it the medical office? Yes, life would be much easier if we could do that."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Only men are allowed to be doctors as such," Gaoshun explained. "And only doctors can prepare medicine, or administer care for anything more serious than a scrape."

So that's it, Maomao thought. She realized now why the clinic hadn't smelled like medicine.

This implied one particular problem, though. "Where does that leave me?" she said. She made as much medicine as she liked. She couldn't bring ingredients in from outside the rear palace, of course, but she was able to use the wide range of herbs growing on the palace grounds and the stuff available at the medical office.

"We're looking the other way. There are a number of ladies-in-waiting with some knowledge of medicine, but in a place like *that*, drugs would be too obvious. We can't keep them there."

Jinshi's tone implied that there was a complicated story here. Maybe it involved the niceties of various rules and regulations, like how the palace women's salaries worked. Maomao didn't know; it wasn't something she had any interest in.

So medicine proper was denied to the clinic, but they managed to get away with using alcohol as a disinfectant. Simply having a clean, quiet place could be enough to help fight many illnesses. If a woman looked in particularly bad shape, it might also be possible to send her back home.

What a lot of trouble, Maomao thought. The only thing that would be harder still was replacing a system that was already established. Too many people out there were too interested in not rocking the boat.

"I wish there were other ways to fill out the medical staff. We may need them one day," Jinshi said. He couldn't castigate Maomao; he wasn't one to

talk. He sounded as if he was speaking to her, but he was essentially talking to himself. “We’ll need a way, when there are no more eunuchs.”

Eunuchs, huh...

The eunuchs made up almost a third of the population of the rear palace. They were much harder to replace than the ladies, so their average age was relatively old.

No young eunuchs, Maomao reflected. The surgery to turn a man into one had been outlawed some years before, after the current Emperor had ascended the throne. Maomao didn’t know when Jinshi had become a eunuch, but judging by his age, it must have been only just before the procedure had been outlawed.

Tough break. If only he could have waited a little longer.

Without really meaning to, she dropped her gaze, glancing between Jinshi’s legs, then brought her hands together gently. She looked up slowly—and found herself meeting Jinshi’s eyes. His face showed a range of conflicting emotions. He looked at Maomao, his mouth half-open.

Crap. I didn’t say that out loud, did I? Maomao put a hand to her mouth and looked away, and this time she found herself looking at Gaoshun. He continued to appear beatific, but she thought he was looking at Jinshi with the same pitying smile as hers.

Slowly, Gaoshun shook his head. “Master Jinshi, business calls,” he prodded.

“All right.” He looked at Maomao. “If you would, let them know I’ll be coming by the Jade Pavilion later.” Then he was walking away, looking as elegant as ever. Maomao finally took her hand away from her mouth.

I could probably make a nice take if I could come up with a medicine that would make it grow back.

It was, shall we say, a most improper thought. But if she could have managed it, she would have done a roaring business indeed.

Chapter 10: Third Time's the Charm (Part One)

The next day Ailan returned from the clinic, but Maomao, much to her chagrin, found herself summoned there—by the middle-aged palace woman who had collared her the day before.

"So that's why they want to see Maomao," Gyokuyou said to Ailan, her hand on her chin. They were in the living area, where Gyokuyou lay stretched out on a couch. Her belly was well and truly round by now, large enough to slow her down. She wore clothes designed to hide the bulge, but even so, it would probably be best for her to avoid attending tea outside the Jade Pavilion for the duration.

"I'm so sorry," Ailan said. "I should have taken it here instead."

Ailan, it seemed, had taken the cold medicine Maomao had made her while she was still at the clinic, where one of the ladies had spotted her and pressed her about where she'd gotten it.

That'd do it, all right, Maomao thought. Medicine wasn't allowed at the clinic because there were no doctors there—you couldn't have people just walking in with it. They had to find out the story behind Ailan's medicine lest official eyes take notice of them.

Maomao was thinking that it would be best for her to head right to the clinic, take her scolding, and get it over with, when Ailan said something most unexpected:

"They want to know if they can borrow her for a while."

"Goodness," said Gyokuyou, looking at Maomao with curiosity. Ailan watched them both with concern.

Maomao could only think what a headache this seemed likely to be, even as she contemplated the ingredients for a new medicine.

Ultimately, Maomao found herself returning to the clinic effectively under guard. It wasn't Ailan escorting her, but Yinghua. She'd probably seemed

right for the job: shorter than Ailan, she was nonetheless more outgoing and more determined to face things head-on.

Even though the clinic was situated within the rear palace, it was quite a walk to get there. Yinghua, ever the talker, couldn't keep herself from chatting on the way.

"Hey, Maomao. After you dropped Ailan off yesterday, did you do something with the lanterns in the garden?"

"You saw that?"

It had been on her way back from the clinic (or more precisely, after she'd bumped into Jinshi and Gaoshun on the way home). Struck by an idea for a new medicine, she'd set out immediately to find components.

"I was just looking for the ingredients for some medicine."

She'd lit a lantern when it got dark, attracting bugs. As well as a certain creature that ate bugs.

"Ingredients? Tell me it wasn't bugs..."

"It wasn't bugs."

Despite Maomao's assurances, Yinghua continued to frown; she seemed to sense that there was something even less pleasant afoot. "Uh, Maomao, about your room... It's gotten pretty full of...*stuff* lately, wouldn't you say? It's really starting to stink of medicine. Lady Hongniang isn't very happy."

"Now, that's scary."

"You don't look very scared..."

Nothing could be further from the truth, Maomao thought. The chief lady-in-waiting had a very quick hand. But then, perhaps one had to be strong like that to survive in the rear palace.

"I think one of these days she's going to kick you out of your room and make you live in a shed in the garden," Yinghua said with a smirk.

"I'd like that very much."

A garden shed would be larger than the room she was in now, and more importantly, well separated from the other ladies' sleeping quarters, so nobody would notice any clattering in the night. It drove Maomao crazy that despite having discovered a treasure trove of unused tools in the medical office, she couldn't make use of them here.

"I'll be sure to inquire about the matter with Lady Hongniang as soon as I get back," Maomao said, her eyes shining.

"Huh? Wait, uh..." They arrived at the clinic before Yinghua could get out

whatever she had been about to say.

"Let's head inside, then," Maomao said.

"Hey, that thing I said—I didn't—!"

Maomao didn't really hear Yinghua; she was too busy wondering if, with a building of her own, she might be able to do work that involved fire. Her heart swelled with anticipation.

The middle-aged woman turned out to be named Shenlü. On close inspection, her eyes had a green hue just like Consort Gyokuyou's. Maybe she had some western blood in her veins. The color of her eyes might also have inspired her name, which meant "deep green."

Maomao and Yinghua were shown into what seemed to be the clinic's reception area, which smelled faintly of alcohol. Shenlü brought tea. They were seated at a simple table, which looked sturdy and well-used, like the chairs and shelves around them.

"My sincere apologies for my rudeness to you," Shenlü began. "I'd no idea you were a servant of the Precious Consort."

"Think nothing of it," Maomao replied.

Shenlü, like many of the palace women who didn't serve directly in the Jade Pavilion, referred to Gyokuyou by her title. *Un*like many of the palace women, Maomao didn't have a particularly distinguished upbringing. She was, in essence, beyond her station here.

Shenlü sounded calm and collected, with no trace of the firm maternal tone she'd adopted while swamped with laundry the day before. It was obvious now that she was a properly educated lady of the rear palace.

I knew she was sharp, Maomao thought. Not every lady of the rear palace could even read and write. To have stayed here as long as Shenlü appeared to have done, she must have been a woman with her wits about her. Or else there had to be some special reason for keeping her around.

At the moment, Shenlü's expression was somewhat dark. Was it because she now knew Maomao was one of Consort Gyokuyou's ladies? Maomao was none too pleased with the idea that she might be receiving special treatment. People had a distinct tendency to look the other way when it came to the doings of the upper consorts—and their ladies-in-waiting. Yet Shenlü had summoned Maomao here personally, a fact that seemed to make her almost as uncomfortable as Maomao.

At length, though, Shenlü looked directly at Maomao and heaved a sigh. “I have a favor I’d like to ask you.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

Shenlü briefly looked taken aback by how nonchalant Maomao sounded, but she quickly composed herself and said, “I’m afraid it may sound somewhat forward. You don’t mind?”

“Go ahead, please.”

Maomao was more than used to being treated rudely. In fact, she was usually as guilty of it as any of her conversation partners were, or at least she suspected she was. Thus, she had the confidence to let most things roll right off her back.

“If I asked you to make a medicine for one of the ladies who serves the Wise Consort, then?”

“*What?*” The reaction came not from Maomao, but from Yinghua, who slapped her hands on the table and leaned forward. The tea sloshed in the cups, a few drops spilling onto the table, where they left dark spots. “Do you know what you’re asking?!” Yinghua demanded.

Shenlü sighed again. “Believe me, I’m all too aware.” She looked at Maomao.

Maomao looked back, seeing that Shenlü was serious. “I presume you have some reason.”

“Maomao!”

“I’m sorry. But it can’t hurt to hear what she has to say, can it?”

Yinghua sat back down, her eyebrows pinching together. She took a sip of her tea, which was cold by now, and appeared to be trying to pull herself together.

“Perhaps you’d be so kind as to tell me what’s going on,” Maomao said.

“Very well,” Shenlü replied, and began to tell the story.

“This is getting out of hand,” Yinghua said, uncharacteristically slumped over.

“You’re not wrong,” Maomao replied. She agreed with Yinghua that it was only going to be trouble, but she couldn’t ignore what she had just heard. One of the maids in the residence of the Wise Consort, Lihua, was desperately ill. The patient was at the Crystal Pavilion at this very moment.

This maid had often done her washing at the laundry area in the northern

quarter, so she and Shenlü had come to know each other. The maid had developed an unsettling cough a bit back, and Shenlü had suggested she get some rest; it had been five days since then and Shenlü hadn't seen the woman.

Maybe she was doing her laundry somewhere else, or maybe the person in charge of the laundry had changed, Maomao had suggested, but Shenlü had shaken her head. "Even if that's true, I'd like her to come and get checked out at least once."

So, a cough, huh? Maomao thought. According to Shenlü, it had been an unusual one. It had begun several days before the woman stopped showing up at the laundry area, but even before that, she'd felt tired and had had a mild but persistent fever. Maomao asked if the maid had formally come to the clinic, but apparently she hadn't been able to get permission.

Nasty place, Maomao thought. A simple maid probably wouldn't have asked Consort Lihua directly for permission to go to the clinic; she would have talked to one of the ladies-in-waiting, who most likely had ignored her. Considering the symptoms, Maomao wished they hadn't.

"You really think she's there?" Yinghua asked.

"I firmly believe we need to look into it," Maomao said. If what Shenlü had told her was true, they had to deal with the problem, and soon. Otherwise, it could well spread far beyond the Crystal Pavilion.

Yinghua studied Maomao closely. "I know these sorts of things get your attention, but this is the Crystal Pavilion we're talking about. You need to at least wait until we can arrange a formal visit. You know that, right? You can't go charging in there again."

"...I know."

Although Maomao had some acquaintance with Consort Lihua, she couldn't just go showing up at her residence. She'd just made that mistake recently. She was desperate to go to the Crystal Pavilion the moment she could, but the stars simply weren't aligned. She had to at least be with Jinshi or she would never get in the door.

All right, freaking out isn't going to do me any good. Maomao was trying to distract herself by thinking of something else when she spotted it. She went rushing over to it, although she had to hop up and down like a frog a few times before she was finally able to grab it.

"Maomao! What was I *just* saying?" Yinghua cried, picking up the hem of

her skirt and following her.

Maomao frowned, feeling the thing between her palms. “Sorry. I couldn’t help myself. I saw something I’ve been looking for.”

“What, a bug? Eww!”

“It’s not a bug.”

And it wasn’t. But it also wasn’t a body. That, sadly, had gotten away, but it had left Maomao with what she wanted. She could still feel it squirming in her hands.

“Look,” she said. She opened her hands to reveal a lizard’s tail, still flouncing wildly. Lizard tails could fall off, but they could also grow back. That was the point.

You can’t give up on anything. The moment you give up, it’s all over, some immortal had once said. If you want to create a new medicine, first look into other things with similar effects. *And I want a medicine that makes things live and grow.* Hence Maomao’s interest in lizards, which she’d suspected might eat the insects that gathered around the garden lanterns.

“I wanted to try to find out how and why the tail grows back,” she said. She was feeling pretty pleased, but there was no response. She looked over to discover that Yinghua, her face pale and her mouth open, had fallen clean over backwards.

Maomao wrapped the tail in a handkerchief and tucked it into the folds of her robe. She ended up having to look after Yinghua until she was feeling better.

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Chapter 11: Third Time's the Charm (Part Two)

There was a general hubbub. People rushed to see what was going on. The elegant entrance hall was already packed with palace women, up to and including maids standing dumbstruck with dustcloths in their hands, completely forgetting that they had been wiping railings and window frames.

"And what, may I ask, brings you here *now*?" asked a lady with her eyebrows drawn together. She was looking directly at the one and only medical officer in the rear palace.

This was most unusual. The doctor hardly ever left the medical office; it had been nearly a year since he had last been seen in the Crystal Pavilion. How could he show his face around here after the death of the young prince? He was notorious now for being a doctor in name only, otherwise incompetent. He had remained in this garden of women, unpunished, chiefly because there would have been no one to replace him.

And now here he was. What could he possibly want?

The doctor carried an outsize bundle and a palace woman followed behind him. The woman was slim, nearly emaciated; her movements were efficient and precise. On her mouth (which she kept closed) was a touch of bright-red lip color, and there was a dusting of pink on her cheeks.

Had there been such a woman in the rear palace? they asked themselves. And wouldn't it be more typical for the eunuch doctor to be assisted by another eunuch? Maybe they were wrong about that. And anyway, there were two thousand palace women here. It wasn't that surprising if there were one or two they didn't recognize.

Since everyone else was busy whispering, *she* had taken it upon herself to step forward. "Can we help you?" When they heard her speak, the other ladies immediately stopped chatting. The maids promptly returned to their tasks, although their dallying didn't go unnoticed. She might not know every face in the rear palace, but she certainly knew every face here at the Crystal

Pavilion. Her name was Shin, and that was her job.

She had come with Lihua when she had been chosen as consort, and had worked ever since to gain the Emperor's affections.

"We'd like to see the Wise Consort, if we might," the doctor said. Shin narrowed her eyes. "Wise Consort" was not an expression she wanted to hear from this man.

"My apologies, sir," she said. "I don't believe Lady Lihua wishes to see you."

The doctor's face with its sad excuse for a mustache drooped at the polite but unambiguous refusal. His facial hair was truly pathetic; as a eunuch, he was no longer able to grow a mustache worthy of a man. He was as far from the Emperor, with his glorious beard, as the clouds were from the dirt.

The eunuch looked back with an expression of distress. The palace woman behind him, with an eminent air of competence, whispered in his ear. The eunuch hesitantly reached into the folds of his robe and produced a piece of parchment paper. "We've got a letter, you see." The parchment was covered in flowing script and bore instructions that the doctor was to be allowed into the residence. The name at the end read: *Jinshi*.

Jinshi, the first person anyone in the rear palace would think of if you said the words "gorgeous eunuch." He was so lovely that, had he been a woman, he could have brought the country to its knees—but he was not a woman. Nor was he a man.

He was beautiful enough to make even Shin sigh in spite of herself, but, unlike the other palace women, he evoked no more feelings than that for her. When she thought of why she had come to the rear palace, she knew she had no time to be distracted by eunuchs. It was vital that she gain the Emperor's affections, not just for herself, but for the sake of her clan. That thought had been drilled into both her and Lihua since they were girls.

Shin's mother was the older sister of Lihua's father. Shin and Lihua were the same age; thus they had entered the rear palace together, and thus Shin oversaw the Crystal Pavilion, where they now lived. All the ladies-in-waiting of the Crystal Pavilion were the daughters of prominent families, of blood suitable to serve His Majesty.

"Very well, then." Shin didn't like it, but she knew when she was beaten. She resolved to show the visitors inside. She could have left the task to one of the other women, but if the doctor was here on the orders of the eunuch who

oversaw the entire rear palace, that changed things. It made her wonder what he was after. The doctor usually only showed up at a consort's residence when she was feeling unwell, but Lihua had shown no sign of ill-health. Shin was at her side constantly; she would have known if Lihua were sick. But today, like every day, the consort had eaten breakfast with gusto; she was feeling fine.

As Shin was puzzling over the meaning of this visit, she realized she no longer heard footsteps behind her. She glanced back to see that the doctor and his attendant had stopped. They were looking at a small building, something of a hut or shed, standing near the garden. Lihua's room was still far away, the innermost chamber on the uppermost floor of the pavilion. This was just one of the small outbuildings on the way there.

"Is something the matter?" Shin inquired.

"Oh, no, I was simply wondering what that little building was."

"It's just a storage shed." Shin was impatient to show them to the consort; why were they wasting time asking about random buildings?

The Crystal Pavilion had been built out when it had appeared that it would be the home of the heir apparent. Was it so strange that there would be freestanding baths or storage buildings? Then there was the weird freckled girl who'd come last year and had some bizarre thing built next to the bath. A sauna, she'd called it, but Shin didn't like it much, although Lihua used it from time to time.

Despite Shin having told them that the shed was for ordinary storage, the palace woman the doctor had brought with him wouldn't stop staring at it. What *did* she find so interesting about it? A shrub that bore yellow flowers grew near its window, but that was the one distinguishing thing about the place.

It was just a storage building. They needed to keep moving.

The palace woman tugged on the eunuch's sleeve, whispering in his ear again. The eunuch frowned, then said to Shin, "Have you done anything different with this garden lately?"

"No," Shin replied. "We leave it to the groundskeeper."

"I see, I see."

Then a wave of doubt caught Shin. Had those plants always been there? When had the gardener done that?

The eunuch fell silent, but the palace woman nudged him again. He

puffed out his cheeks—he was easy to read, but the palace woman's expression never shifted as she turned to Shin. Her dark eyes bored into the chief lady-in-waiting, who said nothing, but tried to avert her gaze.

"You're wearing perfume today, aren't you?" the palace woman asked. Her voice sounded...familiar, somehow. Then that graceful mouth began to twist—she was smiling, but not in a nice way. There was a savagery to the expression, like a wild beast eyeing its prey.

Shin was struck speechless.

"It's been a while, Lady Shin. I must apologize for my rudeness the last time I was here." Her face, with its copious whitening powder, carefully accented eyes, and long eyebrows, came closer. The ostentatious accessories she wore distracted from the shape of her face, but it was round, young.

And the way she *stared*—Shin remembered that look. She felt ice run through her veins. She knew from experience that this woman usually meant trouble. She'd come to the Crystal Pavilion for the first time the year before. She'd nursed Lihua assiduously, but during that time she'd also done a number of outrageous things that had left half the ladies here without the ability to defy her.

Shin was not one of them, but then, the woman had appeared again only recently and all but torn Shin's clothes off. She was not, suffice it to say, someone with whom Shin wished to have much to do.

The woman continued to stare at her; Shin found herself involuntarily backing up.

It was at that moment that the doctor suddenly raced for the garden. The plump little man appeared to be trying to reach the storage shed. Shin tried to go after him, but found her path blocked by the unpleasant woman. Shin shoved past her and tried to pursue the eunuch, but she was too late.

He was holding the bar of the door in his hand and standing there in mute amazement. A distinctive odor drifted from the entrance. It was the same way Lihua had once smelled: the reek of a sick person on her way to the next life.

The other palace woman was rubbing her behind—maybe she'd fallen on it when Shin had shoved her—but she didn't look particularly concerned. There was just a slight furrow in her brow. She grabbed the bundle the eunuch was holding.

No longer bothering to whisper, she shouted, "Hot water! Boil some water right away, please!" Then she rushed into the shed.

The patient was resting on a crude bed, just some woven mats piled on top of each other. She was one of the laundry maids.

"Yes, of course, miss," the eunuch said, pelting off again so fast his chin jiggled.

The palace woman gave the maid what looked to be water, then turned to Shin. "Why is she in here?"

"Do you have to ask? We're isolating her so no one else gets sick. It's only common sense."

The lady obviously wanted to shoot something back, but she restrained herself. Instead she said, "Indeed it is. However..."

The maid was coughing, but it didn't sound normal. The visitor pressed a handkerchief to the maid's mouth as she coughed, and when she took it away, it was speckled with red.

"True, this is an infectious disease. Not highly communicable, but one thing is certain: if you continue to treat her like this, she *will* die. But what's one dead maid, eh?" She moved away from the sick woman, about to go farther into the shed. Before she knew what she was doing, Shin tried to grab her by the shoulder, tried to stop her, but the intruder slipped easily out of her grasp.

No! That's—

Shin tripped on a wicker box as she made another attempt to stop the woman, but now she was too late. The woman was picking something up—a small box.

"When I entered this room, it brought back memories," she said. "Memories of when Consort Lihua was ill."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"You were burning incense to try to disguise the odor."

Yes—but so what? Shin reached out to snatch the box back.

"I noticed something similar when I came in here. But the other way around this time." The woman opened the box to reveal a collection of small, colorful bottles. "You seem to be using this sick woman to disguise the aroma of these perfumes." She popped open one of the bottles and took an experimental sniff. "The ladies of the Crystal Pavilion do like their secrets. And letting innocent eunuchs take the blame."

The woman had opened a bottle of perfume oil, something that had come from the caravan the other day. Most of them had been confiscated by the

eunuchs.

"Each individually is only minimally toxic, but if you combine them, who knows?" the woman said melodically, her eyes narrowing as she smiled. Then the woman, Maomao, asked Shin a question: "What exactly are you doing trying to make a drug to induce a miscarriage?"

○●○

Now, what to do, Maomao wondered as she wiped her face with a handkerchief. She hated the feeling of the whitening powder, and the rouge just wouldn't come off. She'd have to give her hair, which she'd styled with perfume oil, a good, thorough wash later. To disguise her relatively expressionless eyes, she'd cut the ends of her hair short and then glued it near her eyes. She wore a longer skirt than usual, hiding high shoes that made her look taller than she was, but maybe that hadn't been necessary.

After all, the ladies of the Crystal Pavilion had hardly even noticed her.

Feeling a bit sullen, Maomao took off her elevated shoes. She also changed into a different outfit, because the sick woman had coughed some phlegm onto her when Maomao had been examining her. The disease was only mildly infectious, true, but she wasn't about to go walking around in those clothes, and had asked for a new outfit for safety's sake. They'd had to settle for a lady-in-waiting's outfit from the Crystal Pavilion, though, so it lacked something in practicality. More than anything, Maomao wanted a bath, but there was no chance of that, so she gave up the idea.

Finally looking a little neater, she went into the room where everyone was waiting.

The people gathered in the reception room all wore brooding looks. They were dressed in every kind of finery, and when Maomao came in having removed her makeup, she found herself feeling distinctly out of place.

Consort Lihua was there, as were Jinshi and Gaoshun, and a slim woman with a classically beautiful face. At a word from Lihua, the rest of the ladies-in-waiting withdrew. The quack doctor looked like he would have liked nothing more than to be part of the assembly, but he had other work to do and decided to give it precedence. Quite frankly, having him there would have been no particular help.

The beautiful woman was Shin, Consort Lihua's chief lady-in-waiting. They were cousins, and as a woman of distinguished blood herself, Shin had a proud streak; she was, to be fair, lovely enough to attract attention even here in the rear palace. Her face even somewhat resembled that of Lihua, perhaps another sign of the familial connection. She was only a chief lady-in-waiting, but her social status could have qualified her for a position as high as middle consort herself.

So, is that why she was made chief lady-in-waiting?

The consorts weren't the only ones who might gain the Emperor's affections. Cases in which even lowly maids had fallen under the Imperial gaze and become mothers of the country were not entirely absent from the annals. So why have just one beautiful flower in one spot when you could have, as it were, a bouquet?

If a lady-in-waiting became the Emperor's bedmate, and that lady had a social background distinguished enough to warrant being a consort herself, the rank would almost certainly be given to her immediately.

So what does that mean for them? Maomao wondered. She didn't know anything about Lihua's family background, but she could guess that feelings between her and Shin must be complex. It would make one feel secure indeed to forge a bond of trust that would transcend such conflicts.

How lucky Consort Gyokuyou is. Her chief lady-in-waiting, Hongniang, hadn't been put here to serve some special purpose, but seemed to exist purely to oversee Gyokuyou's women. In the service of this cause, she'd even missed the usual window for getting married, so hopefully Gyokuyou would be able to arrange a good match for her someday. The consort's other ladies-in-waiting likewise were all sweet and attractive, but none of them harbored ambitions of drawing the Emperor's interest.

But as for Consort Lihua's ladies-in-waiting...

"What is the meaning of this?" Jinshi demanded, pounding the table with his fist. On the table was a collection of perfume oils and spices—the ones that had been found in the sick woman's chamber. No one of them alone was particularly conspicuous, but together they produced a noticeable aroma.

An aroma that clung to the chief lady-in-waiting, Shin. Even though the last time Maomao had been here, she'd worn no perfume at all. Did that mean her purchases hadn't been confiscated? Or had she simply managed to hide them?

Shin stood silently with her eyes closed.

Not talking, huh?

Her crime was twofold: not just possessing the forbidden substances, but attempting to use them to make some kind of concoction. Her isolating of a maid in a storage shed probably wouldn't be considered an offense. Getting the sick woman out of the main residence to avoid spreading her disease had been an appropriate response. With only one medical officer for the entire rear palace, maids often weren't seen immediately.

And yet he's got so much time on his hands that the medical office is practically becoming a café for the eunuchs.

A mere serving woman might not even be able to entrust herself to the clinic. Not everyone liked to see women take charge of medical care. If someone died because of that attitude, it was a nuisance, but little more. Maids were just that expendable.

Jinshi would use the evidence in front of him to prove what wrongdoing he could, but Shin stood looking as if she knew nothing about any of this. Besides, her family was important enough that she might be able to object to his investigation no matter what he said.

Most inscrutable of all in the room was Consort Lihua, who simply looked at her chief lady-in-waiting, her eyebrows creased. The expression was one of...sadness.

Shin refused to look at the ground, but met the eunuch's eyes.

Huh. The woman's got spirit. Most palace women would have wilted under interrogation by Jinshi, but it looked like his almost supernatural powers weren't going to work on this opponent.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," Shin said. "It's true, I was the one who instructed that serving girl be moved to that building. But I think there's a much more obvious problem here: visitors who show up out of the blue demanding to see Lady Lihua and then barging into our storage buildings. Wouldn't you agree?"

Her tone was clipped, confident. It was true; there was no way of proving that the items found in the storehouse belonged to her. As the building housed a sick person, nobody was likely to have much more contact with her than to bring her meals, but by the same token, almost anyone might have gone in there.

"Then we need simply ask the maid herself."

“If you believe you can trust the word of a woman who’s been addled with fever.”

“So you’re aware she was highly feverish,” Maomao interjected. Shin’s expression shifted; she seemed to resent the intrusion. “How kind of you,” Maomao went on. “Taking the trouble to see how a mere serving girl was feeling. I suppose that would explain, then, how the smell of this perfume got on you.” Her tone was brazen as she picked up one of the little bottles on the table.

All right, time to dial it back, Maomao thought, but her body wouldn’t listen to her; it kept moving. She didn’t like it one bit, but there were things that made her so angry that concerns about her social standing faded away.

“This is what you smell like. This perfume oil. Even though it was tucked neatly inside a wicker trunk. I wonder if the smell is really so powerful that it would seep out like that. Perhaps I might be allowed to check?”

Maomao grabbed for Shin’s sleeve, but the lady-in-waiting was too fast. She pulled away, at the same time raking Maomao’s cheek with her long fingernails.

The room started buzzing. Maomao ran her thumb along the cuts. They’d pierced the skin, but they weren’t really bleeding. “My apologies,” she said. “It’s not for someone of my lowly stature to touch one of your station. We should have someone else, someone more appropriate, perform the investigation.”

She spoke nonchalantly as every gaze in the room settled on Shin. The other woman was barely restraining a scowl, and her eyes were bloodshot. An unpleasant smell of sweat wafted from her. Her pupils were dilated.

People sweat when they get nervous, but it’s glistening stuff that’s distinct from that induced by exercise. The pungent odor can bother even the person producing it. The eyes likewise change when a person is anxious. Although not as obvious as a cat’s, human pupils do change size. This was more noticeable in Consort Gyokuyou, who had lighter irises, than it was in many people, so during tea parties with other consorts she could often be seen to squint slightly as she laughed.

One more push... Maomao had just taken a step forward when someone said:

“Perhaps I might be more suited to handle the matter, then.”

The voice was proud, but not haughty. It belonged to Consort Lihua, who

stood up from her couch, her long skirt rustling as she walked toward Maomao—no, toward Shin, who stood just across from Maomao.

Hmm? Lihua's clothing was quite similar in style to what Gyokuyou had been wearing recently. It would make sense enough, if she'd also bought clothes from the caravan.

"What crime would she be charged with?"

"Lady Lihua..." Shin said. There were a great many conflicting emotions in her eyes, but desperation was not one of them. She refused to beg.

"If she's found to have even attempted to create a drug that would induce a miscarriage, it would be considered the same as if she had murdered the Emperor's child." Jinshi closed his eyes, knowing this was all he had to say.

"I see," Lihua said softly. "And that would be true regardless of which consort was her target?"

"Upper, middle, and lower consorts are all alike in this regard."

Lihua cast her eyes to the ground, then looked at Shin.

A thought flitted through Maomao's mind: the names *Lihua* and *Shin* were something of a pair, meaning "pear blossom" and "apricot," respectively. This woman, Shin, certainly didn't seem unintelligent to Maomao. And yet, the world was full of perfectly smart people who did stupid things, often when they had let their emotions get the better of them and lead them into a mistake. Shin, thought Maomao, might be one of them.

Then Lihua delivered the coup de grâce: "Even if her only intended victim was me myself?"

"Consort!" Jinshi exclaimed, leaning forward. "Do you mean that?" Gaoshun was likewise wide-eyed.

For Maomao, however, Lihua's question made everything fall into place. She'd always thought it was strange that a woman as capable as Lihua should be so unable to find decent ladies-in-waiting. Surely she should have attracted better servants.

It hadn't been her fault. The one who had formed the group of ladies-in-waiting at the Crystal Pavilion was none other than Shin.

After the incident with the toxic face powder, a single lady-in-waiting had been forced to leave, but those above her head had continued their work uninterrupted. And now, Lihua confronted her chief lady-in-waiting...

"Shin. You've never once treated me as befits a true consort. I suppose you never thought I deserved to be a mother of the nation."

That, too, rang true to Maomao. She'd noticed that Shin had never once referred to Lihua as "Consort."

"You and I... Until the very last moment, we didn't know which of us would be the consort, did we?" Lihua's voice was sad. She had real sympathy for Shin. But did Shin feel the same way? She bit her lip and looked at Lihua, her eyes blazing with resentment.

"How dare you talk down to me," the chief lady-in-waiting sneered. "I've always hated that about you. I was a better student than you. I was better at almost everything than you. So why did everyone fawn over *you*?"

Bust size, Maomao observed privately, but she had the decency to feel bad about the thought as soon as she had it. After all, Shin wasn't exactly small herself. No, wait, that wasn't the point.

It wasn't about having a bigger bust, but being a bigger *person*.

"Is it because you were the daughter of the head of our family? Did you think that made you better than me? Don't make me laugh. I was raised my entire life to become a mother to this nation." Shin looked like a wolf baring its fangs. Thinking the chief lady-in-waiting might leap at the consort at any moment, Maomao moved to put herself between the two women, but Gaoshun and Jinshi were already there.

"May I understand you to be admitting to the accusations?" Jinshi said.

In response, Shin grabbed the bottle of perfume oil off the table and flung it at Lihua. Gaoshun slapped it away and the bottle smashed against the floor.

"May you wither in this garden a barren woman!" Shin spat as if pronouncing a curse, as Gaoshun grabbed her hands and restrained her. "How dare a eunuch touch me!" she cried. "Unclean, filthy thing!" She struggled, but she couldn't hope to free herself—even if he was a eunuch, Gaoshun was still a man. Her noble lips continued to produce a stream of foul invective.

You do run into her kind sometimes, Maomao thought. When Shin finally had to pause for a breath before she could resume her tirade, Maomao stepped in front of her and smirked.

"What?" Shin demanded.

"Oh, nothing. I was simply thinking, you must truly revere His Majesty, Lady Shin."

"Of course I do! What are you blathering about?"

"It simply looked to me as if it was the status of mother of the nation that you truly loved. Unlike Consort Lihua." Maomao gave another wide smile.

Shin's mouth hung open.

It was all too clear now what Lihua had that Shin did not.

"Shin... So that's how you felt." Though she looked as if she was fighting back tears, Consort Lihua's voice was clear and firm. Then she stood in front of Shin, raised her hand high—and slapped her across the cheek.

I guess that's the least she should expect, Maomao thought.

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Then, however, Consort Lihua said something that even Maomao hadn't expected.

"Sir Jinshi, I release this chief lady-in-waiting from my service, on the grounds of using abusive speech toward her mistress. So much so that I had to raise my own hand against her."

This time it was Jinshi's turn to go slack-jawed. "Consort..."

"I see an open hand was not emphatic enough." Even as Shin stood looking dazed by the slap, Lihua grabbed her by the collar and made a fist. Jinshi and Gaoshun rushed to stop her. Only Maomao found herself downright impressed. *The lady knows how to handle herself!* Lihua was no longer the consort she had been, waiting vacantly for the thread of her life to be cut.

"I release this woman from my service. And I formally request that she never be allowed in the rear palace again under any circumstances," Lihua said, clearly and confidently.

Even if Shin were to become a mother to the nation, she would live her life not for the country's people, but for her own position. She sought only power; she had no interest in fulfilling the duties and responsibilities that would come along with it. The nation had no need for such a queen.

Shin still hadn't recovered from the slap. Did she understand what mercy she was being shown? Or would she think Lihua had wronged her, and resent her all the more?

Maybe it doesn't matter.

No matter how noble the blood, a woman who left the rear palace under scandalous circumstances would be unable to retaliate against a consort. Personally, Maomao thought Lihua was being a bit soft, but let us consider what humiliation this treatment must have brought to such a proud woman.

"Can I ask you something?" Jinshi said as they walked through the halls of the Crystal Pavilion. He was looking at the building where the sick maid had lain in bed.

"Yes, sir?"

"I know you were aware that the sick woman was here at the Crystal Pavilion, but you didn't know exactly where she was, did you? I mean, you even went to the trouble of putting on a disguise, presumably so no one would be suspicious if you visited repeatedly."

He was right: Maomao had worn that outfit because she herself was by now most unwelcome here. She'd realized she might not figure out where the sick woman was in a single visit, so she'd taken care to keep people from knowing who she was. Yes, a palace woman accompanying the doctor attracted a certain amount of attention, but certainly less than Maomao would have received without a disguise.

The serving women of the Crystal Pavilion knew how to keep their mouths shut. Or perhaps they had been taught how—through harsh discipline from the ladies-in-waiting above them, somewhere Consort Lihua wouldn't have seen.

"Ah, but I did know where she was," Maomao said. She'd already had a sense of where a sick person would be staying: somewhere moderately isolated from the sleeping quarters of the other maids, or anywhere else inconspicuous. When she'd been here full-time, maids who weren't feeling well were given new sleeping quarters to ensure that whatever they were sick with didn't spread. There was even a dedicated sick area within the pavilion.

But a storage shed, yeesh.

The odor wafting from Shin had given her a strange feeling, but she'd never imagined things had gone that far. It was sheer luck that she'd noticed the place.

"That was my clue," she said, pointing to some white flowers. The bush must have been planted recently, because the earth below it was a different color from the rest of the garden. It was awfully poor placement to be the work of a gardener. Right beside a storage shed. The bush bore black fruit full of the white dust that would become face-whitening powder.

"How so?"

"In feng shui, green-colored things are considered good for the health. Supposedly, it's ideal to combine them with white."

White—like all the flowers on the bush. Though the plant was known as whiteblossom, or sometimes the four-o'clock flower, red was a more typical color for it. Maomao had realized that someone must have specifically chosen stock that would bloom white.

She didn't remember the bush being there at the Crystal Pavilion. Someone had planted it—she didn't know who, but it must have been someone who felt for the sick woman. Maomao found a wave of relief rolling through her to know there was at least one person there who did.

Whiteblossom, though... Maomao contemplated the irony of what she had found in the flower's presence along with the sick woman. She let out a long sigh, then realized someone was staring at her. She glanced back to see them half-hidden by a pillar.

"What's the matter?" Jinshi stopped and looked at her. The person watching Maomao looked stricken.

"You go on ahead, Master Jinshi."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're in the way."

Her blunt response seemed to annoy Jinshi, but Gaoshun talked him down the way one might a frustrated ox—giving Maomao a fresh opportunity to appreciate just how good it was to have someone around who could actually intuit what was happening.

Maomao looked toward the woman hiding behind the pillar. "What is it?" she asked. The other woman looked perhaps a little bit older than Maomao, but she also appeared distinctly intimidated. By Maomao, or by her companions? It was hard to say.

"Uh, um... A-About the woman in that building..."

There was a fresh, white flower in the young woman's hand. Green and white: the colors were unmistakable. The woman carried herself well, although she spoke hesitantly.

"She's no longer there. It was decided that she would leave the rear palace, but they're sending her somewhere it will be easier for her to get better."

Consort Lihua, feeling that responsibility rested with her, had volunteered to pay the woman's medical costs and give her a stipend to live on.

"Oh. So she left..." The maid looked at the ground, but at the same time, appeared relieved. She let her hands brush her cheeks in an attempt to hide the tears that were spilling down them, then bowed to Maomao and went back to her work.

Behind her there were only small, white petals on the ground.

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Chapter 12: The Shrine of Choosing

It's said that once upon a time, a different people lived in these lands. These people had no chieftain, but a woman of noble blood came to them from a far place and took up residence among them, and conceived in her belly the son of heaven, who would become the country's first emperor.

The woman was called Wang Mu, "the Mother Royal," and some said she was an immortal. She possessed eyes that could see even in the dark of a moonless night, and it was with this strength of vision that she led the people.

The elderly eunuch read aloud from the book in his soft, gentle voice. About half his pupils were listening attentively; the other half were either actively asleep, or struggling not to be. Maomao, fighting back a yawn herself, didn't blame them for feeling a little drowsy.

From what she could see from her vantage point outside the classroom, there appeared to be about twenty students, though she didn't know if that was a lot or a little. So it went, she thought, but the eunuch beside her seemed somewhat let down.

"Sir, they'll see you," she said to Jinshi, whose face threatened to be visible through the window. Nobody would be able to concentrate on their studies if they knew such a beautiful creature was watching them.

"I was told there were only about ten students to start with, so I think the numbers have gone up a little," Gaoshun said placatingly.

They were at the rear palace's "institute of practical studies," which Jinshi had spearheaded. He'd wanted to hang out a sign boldly proclaiming that it was a place of learning, but Maomao had dissuaded him, arguing that making a big deal about it would only make things more difficult, so in the end the school went ahead quietly.

They'd refurbished one of the less-dilapidated buildings of the northern quarter to serve the purpose. In fact, this was the building that had been used when the foreign emissaries had visited recently, so it was looking very nice indeed.

Xiaolan was among the students. Maomao could see her rubbing her eyes sleepily, splitting her attention equally between the textbook and the teacher. She'd learned to recognize many common words by now and had moved on to reading simple stories. The one the teacher had just been reading was the story of how the nation had been founded, something everyone would have heard at least once in their lives.

Maomao herself had no interest in learning such things at this point in her life, but Jinshi had invited her to come see how lessons were going, and she couldn't really say no. Anyway, it would be untrue to say she wasn't curious. Xiaolan was there, along with a few other palace women Maomao knew, and most of all, if Jinshi's plan succeeded, it could change the face of the rear palace.

"Master Jinshi, it's time."

Jinshi was a busy eunuch, as his attendant reminded him, and he reluctantly turned away from his brainchild. He probably would have liked to continue to observe for a while yet, but he had other things to do.

"What are you going to do next?" he asked Maomao.

"I'd like to stay here and watch a little longer, if that's all right."

"Mm. If you notice anything amiss, report it to me."

Maomao bowed slowly.

When class was over, some eunuchs appeared with baked snacks that they distributed to the students, who eyed the treats hungrily. Maomao found Xiaolan and went over to her.

"Oh, Fwaofwao," Xiaolan said around a mouthful of food. She looked like she was going to choke, so Maomao asked one of the eunuchs to bring some water, and by the time he got back, Xiaolan was indeed pounding on her chest.

Alongside the textbook on her desk was a sand tray. The books were provided to the students, but handing out consumables like paper and brushes would soon drain the funds dry, so instead, students practiced their characters in small trays of sand. The smudges on Xiaolan's pointer finger suggested she'd been working hard. True, she'd looked pretty spent by it—but Maomao could pretend she hadn't noticed.

Xiaolan took the cup Maomao offered her and took a drink, then a noisy breath.

“Managing to pick anything up?” Maomao asked.

“Hee hee. I’ve still got a long way to go. I want to ask the teacher about this,” Xiaolan said, pointing to something in the textbook several pages ahead of what the instructor had been reading. “Me, I’m not that smart. If I don’t work ahead a little, I don’t think I’d ever keep up!” She stuffed the rest of her food in her mouth and washed it down with another drink.

Maomao decided to go with Xiaolan, just casually. They left the classroom and went through a covered hallway to an adjacent building where the instructor kept his office. Outside, Maomao could see the pond that had been used to stage their performance at the night banquet, and beyond it an old shrine. The shrine had supposedly been there since before the founding of the rear palace, and the architecture was different from what Maomao was used to. It was a long, narrow building oriented along a north-south axis. The relative lack of weathering compared to the other buildings nearby implied the shrine saw regular maintenance.

I wonder if they still observe some ritual there, Maomao thought. But in any event, they passed the shrine by and arrived at the teacher’s office.

“Excuse meee,” Xiaolan said. “May I have a few minutes?” It wasn’t exactly a refined greeting, but the old eunuch welcomed them in with a smile just the same. Xiaolan’s affable nature seemed to have gotten the better of him. He spoke to her as gently as if he were talking to his own grandchild.

“I don’t believe I’ve seen your friend there before.”

“Just tagging along,” Maomao said.

“I see, I see. Have a seat in that chair and wait, then, if you don’t mind.” The eunuch smiled at her. Maomao obligingly went and sat down. She looked out the window, gazing at the shrine they’d passed by earlier. Its pillars were closely spaced, and the interior appeared to be divided into a complicated series of rooms.

“Wondering about that shrine?” the eunuch asked.

“A little. I can’t help thinking the architecture is somewhat odd.”

This was Maomao, who promptly became obsessed with anything that caught her interest. She’d been staring fixedly at the shrine without realizing it.

“That shrine was built by the original inhabitants of this land. Lady Wang Mu, the Mother Royal, chose not to forbid the people from practicing their faith when she ruled this place. Instead she used it, and made that faith

concrete."

Wang Mu was the woman who had appeared in the founding myth the eunuch had been teaching in class; she was said to be the mother of the first emperor. There were many interpretations of the story, the most popular being that she was either the survivor of a vanished country, or else a female immortal descended from the immortal realms.

"Any who would rule this land must pass through that shrine, and only those who choose the proper path may become chieftains of the land. Such was the charge Wang Mu laid upon the first emperor." Her son was able to pass the test and thus became ruler of the land.

"Very interesting."

"Isn't it? That shrine was the reason the capital was moved here, as well." The old eunuch smiled nostalgically. "It hasn't been used in decades, though, and I question whether it will see use again in the future."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well..." The eunuch handed Xiaolan a writing utensil, kindly allowing her to use his own brush. She took it and frowned, still struggling to hold the brush correctly. She didn't seem interested in what he and Maomao were talking about.

"All of the elder brothers of His Former Majesty were felled by an epidemic. Worse, many male children and infants died, depriving the Imperial line of any potential successors."

That was why the previous emperor, his parents' youngest son, had ascended the throne. The circumstances had long invited ugly rumors to the effect that the empress regnant—his mother—had had a hand in the "plague."

Maomao couldn't help thinking that the eunuch's story was not the most respectful toward the Imperial family, but she sensed no hostility in his voice; if anything, he had the dispassionate air of a scholar laying out facts.

Xiaolan plunged the brush into the ink, splattering polka dots on her cheek.

Rites of passage were by no means unusual, but Maomao found her interest especially piqued by this one. She looked at the shrine, and the eunuch looked at her, though at first she wasn't sure what he was thinking.

"I must say, I'm happy to know someone is interested in that old building," he said. "Not many want to hear such tales. It's been quite a long time." Then he, too, looked outside.

“But there was someone once? In the past?”

“Yes. Hrm... A doctor who was here many years ago, a real eccentric. Whenever he had time on his hands, he would go wandering about the rear palace with a look on his face much like the one on yours now.”

A face floated into Maomao’s mind. “His name wouldn’t have been Luomen, by any chance?”

The eunuch’s eyes widened with surprise. “You know him?”

Maomao’s old man Luomen looked like an ordinary, reasonable person, but he really wasn’t. For one thing, if he had been reasonable and ordinary, he wouldn’t have planted medicinal herbs all over the rear palace.

Oops. Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned him.

He had, after all, been banished as a criminal; maybe it would have been better not to say his name. To all appearances, though, the eunuch didn’t bear Luomen any ill will. Maomao said only, but honestly, that Luomen was a relation of hers, and that he now made his living (barely) as an apothecary.

The eunuch looked at Maomao, clearly moved. Xiaolan, meanwhile, was gazing intently at her own unsteady characters.

“I see,” the eunuch said. “Yes, Luomen...” Maybe he’d been friends with her adoptive father. She wanted to ask about it, but realized it was time to be getting back. She collected Xiaolan (who had folded the sheet full of characters, despite their crudeness, and tucked it lovingly into the folds of her robes) and left the school.

Two days later, His Majesty paid a visit to the Jade Pavilion. Maomao performed her food-tasting duties as usual and was just about to leave the room when he stopped her.

“How can I help you, sir?” she said. If His Majesty wanted to talk to her, it was probably about the illustrated “textbooks” or the like. Unfortunately, she could now only distribute whatever she could get past the censor, so it was no longer so easy to slip things to His Majesty. She thought she’d asked Jinshi to tell him that personally.

“I intend to go to the Shrine of Choosing now. I’d like you to accompany me.”

Huh? Maomao slapped a hand over her mouth before the sound could make it out.

What in the world was going on?

They went by lantern light through the darkness, heading for the northern quarter of the palace. His Majesty's two eunuch bodyguards were with them, as were Jinshi and Gaoshun. Jinshi was watching the entire thing with a probing eye; he appeared to have been called out here quite suddenly.

What does His Majesty have in mind? Maomao wondered. The northern quarter was never exactly bustling, but at night it became eerily silent. The one silver lining was that at least they didn't hear any sounds of *unhealthy* love emanating from the bushes or the shadows of the trees.

When they reached the shrine, someone was waiting for them: the old eunuch Maomao had spoken to earlier that day.

"I've been waiting for you," he said with a respectful bow. The Emperor, stroking the beard of which he was so proud, nodded at him.

"May I enter once more?"

"You may enter as many times as you wish, Your Majesty."

The hairs on Maomao's neck stood up at what sounded like an undertone of provocation in the eunuch's words. The Emperor, still working at his beard, remained perfectly calm, but Gaoshun and the other eunuchs didn't hide their displeasure. Jinshi alone didn't frown; he was staring intently at the shrine and seemed to be thinking.

The old eunuch unlocked the shrine door and ushered the Emperor inside. "And whom do you require for your attendants?" the eunuch asked, and again he sounded faintly mocking.

"These two, if I may," the Emperor replied. He was looking at Jinshi and Maomao, grinning.

What's this about? Maomao wondered, looking less than pleased as she entered the shrine. She could understand why His Majesty would choose Jinshi. He officiated ceremonies and everything, so he was used to these kinds of places. But Maomao? What possible purpose could she serve?

"Women aren't forbidden in here or something?" Maomao whispered to the old eunuch, but he smiled broadly.

"You may recall that Wang Mu and the empress regnant were both women."

Maomao didn't respond to that, just put her head down and followed the two men.

Just past the shrine entrance was a large, empty space. There were three doors, each of a different color, and above them a sign that read: *Pass not through the red door.*

Maomao squinted. The doors were blue, red, and green, respectively. The color of each was clear and bright, suggesting they were regularly refreshed.

"Which door do you choose, sir?" the old eunuch said, stroking his chin.

The Emperor scratched the back of his neck, then headed for the blue door. "I chose the green one last time. Might as well try this one."

"Indeed, sir."

The party passed through the blue door. They continued through a narrow hallway, then arrived in the next room to find three more doors and another sign. Maomao cocked her head. The sign read, *Pass not through the black door.* This time, the doors were vivid red, black, and white. The walls and pillars were noticeably dusty, yet the doors were freshly colored.

"Looking after this place is a chore, I can tell you. Just when I thought it would never be used again, someone comes along saying he suddenly wants to enter." The old eunuch rubbed his shoulders pointedly; evidently he was the one who had to paint the doors.

The Emperor stroked his beard, then picked the red door. Beyond it was another hallway, and then another room. Three more doors, and a new riddle. Maomao wondered despondently how many more rooms there would be. Without any windows to let a breeze through, the shrine was stuffy and warm.

She had been right about one thing: the shrine's layout was certainly complex. Sometimes they backtracked, or went up a flight of stairs, until she had lost all sense of direction. Eventually she realized that some of the rooms shared doors with each other.

Guess it's not meant to be over quickly.

Quite apart from Maomao's impatience, Jinshi was staring at the doors and sign with an unusually serious look. *Pass not through the blue door*, the sign instructed. The doors in this room were blue, purple, and yellow. His Majesty chose the yellow door.

"Seems this is the last one," he said. The door creaked open, but beyond it was only a single door. In place of a question, the sign above it read: *Child of royalty, yet not child of the Mother Royal.*

It didn't exactly make sense, but it was a pretty clear rejection.

“Same as last time, eh?” The Emperor seemed to be hiding a bitter smile behind his bountiful beard. Jinshi was watching him closely. “Is it not given to me to know the will of heaven?”

“Your Majesty jests. Ever since this shrine was closed away in the rear palace, I alone have been left to oversee it. Heaven’s will has nothing to do with it.” The eunuch put his hands in his sleeves and bowed his head. Something in his manner seemed to say that despite having been made a eunuch, he still harbored some unshakable pride. Most likely, this man had been overseeing this shrine for some long time—and when the building had found itself within the boundaries of the rear palace, he had gone so far as to accept castration to continue protecting it.

The Emperor had followed all of the signs’ instructions to the letter. Had he still somehow made a mistake?

The eunuch opened the door before them. “You’ll find the exit this way, sir,” he said.

Maomao and the others, still unsettled, went outside.

On what conceivable basis had the Emperor been rejected? Maomao counted on her fingers, tallying up the number of rooms, thinking about which doors the Emperor had chosen. She even sat down to ponder it, using a twig to scratch in the dust the order of the doors he’d picked as best she could remember it. She realized it probably wasn’t the most becoming behavior with the sovereign himself still present, but she did it anyway.

“I’m certain Luomen would understand,” the eunuch said.

My old man would? Maomao thought. Was that so? Was this a riddle he might be able to answer for them? It was nice of the eunuch to give them a hint and all, but at the same time it made Maomao purse her lips in annoyance. She felt like he was saying: *Your old man would get it, but you never will.* She knew her adoptive father was something special, but it rankled her to be completely dismissed like that.

In other words, Maomao was angry.

“You’re saying my adoptive father would know what’s going on?”

“I couldn’t say. It’s possible,” the eunuch replied, suddenly evasive.

Luomen would understand: in other words, the key was something he *knew*. His knowledge was broad, but he particularly excelled in medicine. Was that where the solution lay?

Jinshi and the Emperor were watching Maomao expectantly. She felt a

shiver run down her spine. *Wish they'd stop that.* They could look at her as hopefully as they wanted; she wasn't her old man, and wouldn't be able to come up with the answer so easily. That only made her more frustrated, though. And something still nagged at her.

Three doors, three colors... How did they go together?

"Do you know what it means when it says I am not a child of the Mother Royal?" the Emperor asked.

The Mother Royal? Maomao thought. *Wang Mu?*

Yes—the mother of the first emperor, spoken of in the country's earliest stories. The tales never mentioned a father. Normally, one would expect that to produce an emphasis on the maternal line. Yet in Maomao's country, agnatic descent was the rule, inheritance passing from father to son.

Once again, Maomao thought over the words on that last sign.

Child of royalty, yet not child of the Mother Royal.

Did the words hold some great secret?

Could the expression "child of royalty" refer to the paternal line?

It was said that male children received what made them fit to rule from their fathers. Meanwhile, in a matrilineal system, female children were said to receive what made *them* fit from their mothers.

The Imperial throne had been occupied by a direct line of male successors; true, the occasional empress had interposed herself, but as far as Maomao was aware these women's bloodlines hadn't continued. Suppose the blood of Wang Mu still remained somehow: what would it lead one to do?

Suddenly, Maomao found herself remembering the story of the former emperor. The last of his family's sons, his older brothers dying young of an epidemic and clearing the way for him to take the throne. The fact that he alone had survived when all his brothers had died had inspired rumors that the empress regnant might have had a hand in things.

But is it possible that—?

Maomao looked at the old eunuch, the Emperor, and Jinshi, and then she went and stood in front of Jinshi. "Master Jinshi. Were the brothers of the previous sovereign all borne by the same mother?"

He looked perplexed by the suddenness of the question, but it took him hardly the space of breath to answer, "I'm given to understand that not all of them shared the same mother, but that the mothers of all the Imperial princes were sisters. Cousins of the emperor before last, I believe."

“Close kin, then.” When it came to noble blood, marrying sisters and close relatives wasn’t uncommon; indeed, Consort Lihua herself was a not-too-distant relative of the Emperor. “May I ask something else?” Maomao said, somewhat hesitantly.

“What?”

“I’m afraid it may be considered terribly improper.” Depending on their reaction, it could even get her killed on the spot.

“Speak.” It was not Jinshi who issued the command, but the Emperor himself.

Maomao took a deep breath and let all the words out at once: “Is it possible that many or most of those who have occupied the throne down the generations have had poor eyesight?”

It was neither Jinshi nor His Majesty who reacted most noticeably to this question, but the old eunuch. Maomao smirked.

“I have heard that many of them didn’t see well, but the previous emperor had good eyes,” His Majesty said, but this only confirmed for Maomao what she already suspected. She looked at the shrine.

“Would it be possible to go through this thing again?”

“You believe you’re qualified, young lady?” the eunuch said teasingly. “Women have been brought into the shrine many times, but they were always princesses or consorts. You were permitted entry last time, but I’m afraid I question allowing you in repeatedly. Particularly if you’re going to advise on the choice of doors.”

Maomao was far too scrawny to be called a beautiful princess even in flattery; evidently, it would be improper for her to enter the shrine repeatedly. The Emperor laughed merrily. “Perhaps I should name you one of my consorts, then. Though I think I would be lucky to survive telling Lakan about it.”

Surely you jest, Maomao thought.

“Surely you jest,” Jinshi said, stepping out in front of her. “Imagine the looks your other ladies would give you.”

“True, too true!” His Majesty said, clutching his sides in mirth. He patted Maomao on the head. She was used to seeing him at his leisure in the Jade Pavilion, but tonight he seemed to be relaxing in a somewhat different way.

I think he’s mocking me.

And perhaps he was. After all, Maomao was well aware that a lady had to

have a bust of about ninety centimeters to even begin to excite the Emperor's interest. Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Lihua both met that standard and more.

Jinshi was looking at the Emperor, perturbed—was it Maomao's imagination, or did he look a bit like a pouting child?

"*You* take her, then," he said to Jinshi, and then he looked at the old eunuch. "You'd have no objection then, would you?"

The eunuch pulled a face but looked at Jinshi. "You would accept that?"

"If His Majesty so orders, then I can only obey. Anyway, the girl is working something out."

"And I'm quite interested to know what it is," the Emperor chipped in, chuckling. The old eunuch headed back to the shrine entrance, looking thoroughly exasperated. The Emperor, who appeared quite pleased, jerked his thumb in the direction the eunuch had gone, as if to say, *Let's go.*

They went to the entrance once more, this time with Jinshi in the lead, followed by the Emperor and the old eunuch. Maomao trailed behind them, surprised to realize that it seemed anyone at all could attempt the shrine. They entered the first room, and Jinshi turned back to look at Maomao. The red, blue, and green doors stood before them.

"Which shall I choose?" he asked.

Maomao narrowed her eyes. The sign above the doors said only not to pass through the red one. Slowly, she pointed at the blue door. Jinshi obediently opened it. It was the same one the Emperor had chosen earlier. The old eunuch arched an eyebrow.

In the next room, Maomao picked the white door, earning herself another eyebrow arch.

"Hm, taking a different path from myself this time?" the Emperor said, stroking his beard as he followed Jinshi through the white door. Ordinarily, it might have been considered rude for Jinshi to walk ahead of His Majesty, but none of them—Jinshi or the Emperor or the old eunuch—seemed to take it amiss. The sovereign had always seemed to have a fairly permissive streak, so maybe he wasn't particularly interested in standing on ceremony.

Maomao led them through the next room, and then the next, until finally they arrived in the tenth chamber. This time the sign said something a little different:

Choose thou the red door.

There were still three doors—but none of them were red. Instead, they were white, black, and green.

"What is this?" Jinshi said, sounding agitated. It was understandable; he didn't see any red door. That was exactly what, in Maomao's mind, made it clear that this was the final riddle. She pointed to the green door.

"Go through there, and you'll understand," she said.

Jinshi must have trusted her, for he opened the green door without hesitation. Beyond it was a hallway, at the far end of which they could see a staircase. They ascended, their footsteps echoing on the stairs, and opened the door at the end to be greeted by a damp breeze.

They were on the roof of the shrine, up high enough to see out over the entire rear palace. The square space seemed to have been constructed specifically to inspire the sense that one was gazing down on all around.

The old eunuch's lips were twitching; whether he was fighting a smile or a scowl, Maomao wasn't sure. "My congratulations. You have chosen the proper path," he said, looking around. "In days of old, only those chosen by Wang Mu could become the next king. Eventually, the kings came to be called emperors."

Throughout the ages, the first order of business of those so selected had been to give an address from this shrine. Considering the sophistication of the architecture at the time, the shrine had presumably been the tallest thing in existence.

"There were times when no one was able to choose the correct path. In such cases, they would return accompanied by a consort who was able to do so." The old eunuch looked at Maomao with a pained expression. "Traditionally, only those of the proper blood have been able to succeed, but in this case it seems someone else has guessed the right order." This evidently didn't agree with him.

The geezer makes that sound like a bad thing, Maomao thought, all too readily drawn in by his provocation. She'd chosen correctly—what was wrong with that?

"History lessons are all well and good, but perhaps you could explain what's going on so that I can understand it?" the Emperor said.

"Does one so august as His Majesty lower himself to ask teaching of me?" the eunuch said. This time it was Jinshi's turn to raise an eyebrow, but the

Emperor was too even-keeled to be drawn in by the eunuch's taunt. Nonetheless, the old man said, "You shouldn't hear it from my lips. I suggest you ask the girl."

He was going to foist it off on her.

"Well?" the Emperor said, turning to Maomao. But there were things even she found difficult to say.

Trying to decide how best to put the matter, she said, "Very well. Allow me to explain what guided my thinking in choosing the doors."

Out of the first three doors—blue, red, and green—Maomao had chosen the blue one. The sign said only to avoid the red door, so one might think the green door was a perfectly fine choice. And normally, one might be right. But "normal" didn't quite apply in this shrine...

"There are certain people who would be unable to distinguish which door was red and which was green," Maomao said.

"Unable to distinguish one from the other?" Jinshi asked, puzzled. His Majesty looked equally perplexed. The two of them were such different people, yet with that expression of confusion on their faces, they looked oddly similar.

"Yes," Maomao replied, "and so they would choose the door that they could be certain wasn't red."

That would be the blue one. The first chamber would whittle down the candidates by half.

"The next room is the same. If you couldn't tell the difference between black and red, you would choose the white door." And half the remaining candidates would be weeded out.

In each room, there appeared to be two possible right answers, but in fact there was only one. The final riddle worked the same way. Because the candidate would be certain that the white door was white and the black one black, they would assume the final door must be the red one. It wasn't, of course; it was green, but because anyone who had made it that far would be unable to tell red and green apart, they wouldn't know that.

Only half of those who entered the shrine would choose the correct door in the first room; in the second room, it would be a quarter, and by that ninth door, only one out of every 512 people would make the right choice.

"And what does all this mean?" Jinshi asked, still obviously flummoxed.

"It means that those who are chosen by this shrine—those who prove

themselves the children of Wang Mu—have one thing in common: they can't see color."

They could see *some* colors, of course. Individual differences would mean some people would still make wrong choices, and conversely, it was possible that some had simply guessed wrong. But they need only return with someone whose blood was closer to Wang Mu's. That was why consorts were allowed into the shrine.

"It's not common in this country, but in the west, people are periodically born unable to distinguish between red and green," Maomao said. Her father had told her that roughly one out of every ten people in the country where he had studied had this condition. It was evidently less common in women than in men. It was passed down from parent to child, and although it could be a hindrance in daily life, it was also possible to adapt to it such that others might never realize a person had the trait.

That was why the old eunuch had said Maomao's old man might understand.

"Some also claim," she went on, "that the more trouble one has distinguishing colors, the better one's night vision is." She'd never investigated that claim personally, so she couldn't be sure. However, for such a profoundly challenging trait to persist down to the present day, it was likely to co-occur with some exceptional benefit. "And I believe in the founding story, Wang Mu is said to be able to see clearly even on a dark night."

Wang Mu had come from a far land and had carried with her an inability that hadn't been present here before—the inability to distinguish color. It couldn't have been easy for her and the retainers she brought with her to start a new life in this place. Perhaps the solution was marriage. In the story, Wang Mu didn't have a husband, but it would be reasonable to suppose she'd wed the chieftain of this area. It was hardly unusual for people from other lands to be taken as spouses in order to help dilute blood that had become too concentrated. If that spouse had local authority, so much the better. It would explain why people here prized patrilineal descent despite tracing their ancestry back to Wang Mu.

Yet Wang Mu, or perhaps one of those who had come with her, hadn't wanted lineage alone to determine the succession; instead, while continuing the chieftain's bloodline, a different way was created to discern whether a person had inherited Wang Mu's blood: the Shrine of Choosing.

The passage of time slowly but surely warped the truth of the matter. When a strange people with strange technology arrive somewhere new, over time they're absorbed into the local population, generation by generation. A simpler method was to leave a written record. Wang Mu's story was written down in characters the local populace didn't know, and as those who had witnessed their arrival died out, the story became the truth. A conquest patient and peaceful.

Not that I can tell them *that*, Maomao thought. She proceeded to explain all this to Jinshi and the Emperor, passing over the most inconvenient parts. They might look askance at a few of the things she said, but she doubted they would pursue the matter too closely, nor did she want them to. Everyone would be happier that way. So Maomao picked her way through the story, refraining from saying anything she thought her old man wouldn't have told them.

"So you're saying the blood of Wang Mu doesn't flow through my veins? It's true that my mother wasn't of royal lineage, nor my grandmother, the empress regnant."

Maomao shook her head. "This shrine exists only as a way of being certain that the blood *is* present, not demonstrating that it isn't. Sometimes a characteristic may be seen in the parent that doesn't appear in the child."

There was also, of course, always the possibility that the Emperor's honored mother had been unfaithful—but she would keep that to herself.

"In any event, allowing the blood to become too concentrated can bring serious problems of its own." All of the former emperor's older brothers had died of the same epidemic, for example, presumably along with many other close relatives. "Perhaps the result of trying too hard to satisfy the shrine."

When Maomao finished her explanation, she heard clapping: the old eunuch was applauding.

"Never once did I imagine the likes of this girl would really and truly solve the riddle," he said. Okay, so he could be rude sometimes. "It's said that Wang Mu came to rule this land because of her unparalleled wisdom." After all, only a truly keen intellect could come up with something like that shrine as a means of maintaining their bloodline. "If you wish to further thin the blood, might I suggest taking someone like this young lady into your retinue?"

*Ex*cuse *me?*

What was that doddering old coot thinking? Maomao wanted to pull off a shoe and fling it at him.

"Amusing as that might be, I'd rather not make an enemy of Lakan. And perhaps more importantly, her bust would have to grow about another fifteen centimeters first!"

First: just how intimidated was he by the "fox strategist"? And second: *Really?*

"I grant there are many who wouldn't smile upon it," the old eunuch said. He looked into the distance for a second, then glanced at Maomao. "Do be wary."

"I'm well aware," the Emperor said.

"I know you are, Majesty," the eunuch said, this time looking at Jinshi. "Do be wary," he repeated.

Jinshi nodded without a word.

Just who is this guy? Maomao wondered. Simply a eunuch who had found favor with the Emperor? It didn't matter. Maomao foresaw nothing good in knowing the answer. *Maybe it doesn't matter who he is.* She would leave well enough alone. Ignorance, as they said, was bliss.

She was ignorant of something else, as well, however: that she would yet have cause to regret what she didn't know.

Chapter 13: The Empress Dowager

Maomao was thrilled. Indeed, she could hardly have been happier. Behind her, Hongniang and Yinghua stood looking intimidating.

"Really? Right here?" Maomao asked, watching Hongniang carefully.

"Yes! Have a good, hard think about what you did," the chief lady-in-waiting replied with a snort. Maomao's eyes began to brim with tears, and she clasped Hongniang's hand.

"Thank you so much!" she said, bowing deeply.

"Er—?"

"Wait... Maomao?! Ooh, this is the exact *opposite* of what we wanted!"

Maomao, paying no heed to Hongniang and Yinghua's dismay, veritably flew into the storage shed. This was to be her room from today forth.

"Don't you think that's a little harsh, Yinghua?" Guiyuan asked as she poured some tea, which she offered along with a snack to Yinghua.

"I thought so too, but it's her own fault," Yinghua replied, managing to purse her lips and sip her tea at the same time. Today they were having a sweet-smelling fermented tea from the west. "We kept telling her to stop, but she wouldn't! We know she was out collecting bugs again..." She glared at Maomao. Hongniang, it seemed, had thrown out all the fruits of Maomao's efforts.

Maomao only cocked her head. She'd stopped trying to gather lizard tails, recognizing that work couldn't get done around the Jade Pavilion if the ladies-in-waiting kept fainting. "What are you talking about?" she asked Yinghua, genuinely surprised. "I stopped after the thing with the lizard."

"There's talk! We heard a weird lady was going around the rear palace collecting bugs and laughing like a maniac."

Maomao didn't say anything, but Yinghua—and now Guiyuan too—both looked scandalized.

This was clearly some sort of misunderstanding.

"I don't do that," Maomao said earnestly. Yes, she'd collected moths one

time recently, but that had been for work. She hadn't gone after a single other bug since then. Or lizard. "And if I did do something like that, it wouldn't be bugs I was after. It would be herbs."

"But you admit you would be maniacal about it?"

Yinghua and Guiyuan looked thoroughly exasperated as they studied Maomao. Of late, they had finally started to grasp her true nature.

Grr. She knew that look. They didn't believe her.

But it was true. Maomao had only been laughing because she'd found some medicinal herbs, not because of any bugs. She did have *some* measure of common sense. She understood perfectly well what would happen if she tried to cultivate insects in that cramped room. It was summer; it would be a catastrophe.

Maomao frowned and balled her hands into fists. This was a very grave situation. But she thought she knew who was really responsible.

"Huh? Hihui's beeb booing whah?" Xiaolan asked, her mouth full of peach bun. Maomao offered her a bamboo cylinder full of sweet tea and nodded. They were chatting and snacking behind the laundry area, as usual. Maomao had made Xiaolan write a few characters in the dust to satisfy herself that the girl was paying attention in class. She certainly was.

"That Shisui... She's the most mercurial creature," Xiaolan said, drinking some tea. Maybe it was her recent academic bent that had introduced difficult words like that into her vocabulary. She hopped down off the barrel she'd been sitting on and trotted toward some palace women chatting near the well. "Hey, you don't know where Shisui's been lately, do you?"

Maomao went after her. The three palace women answered Xiaolan with a friendly greeting, although they stiffened a bit when Maomao approached. Their reaction wasn't unusual; Xiaolan and Shisui were about the only women with tastes strange enough to enjoy talking to Maomao.

"She's an odd one," one of the ladies said. "Just when you think you've seen her, it's like she's gone again."

"You know, I feel like she's been around..."

"Yeah, me too."

The one thing they seemed sure about was that they weren't sure.

"Ooh, where, where? Tell me, pretty please!" Xiaolan, with no fear of anyone she might be talking to, began to pester them mercilessly. The three

ladies looked at each other, obviously hesitant to say. They were probably feeling sensitive about having Maomao there. Her outfit wasn't like theirs. It was still plain and easy to move in, sure, but it wasn't one of the general uniforms the rear palace issued to its staff. No, she wore clothing given to her by her mistress, as befitted an attendant of one of the consorts.

Those outfits created an invisible but uncrossable barrier between those who attended the consorts and those who didn't.

Shoot... Maomao realized she should have kept her distance. Some of the palace women could be hostile toward those who served the consorts, but many of them simply clammed up, afraid that sharing the wrong rumor might get them in trouble. Few people were as carefree as Xiaolan.

So, what to do now? She might have been able to lighten the mood with some snacks, but she'd given everything she had to Xiaolan already. Maomao felt in the folds of her robe, wondering if she might be carrying anything that could work as a bribe in lieu of food.

Ooh! she thought as she ran across one particular item.

"If any of you have any details, I might find my way to giving you this."

It was a lovely piece of cloth, pleasant to the touch and faintly perfumed. It was technically a handkerchief, but it was of such fine material that, with some imagination, it could be practically anything. In point of fact, Jinshi had given it to Maomao when her cheek had been injured. She'd been thinking she might be able to sell it to the quack doctor at the medical office. She didn't want to spend too long thinking about any interest in men he might have, but she might get a few coins out of him for something that had belonged to the gorgeous eunuch.

"Is that..."

"It looks like silk, doesn't it? Most unsuitable material for a handkerchief, I daresay."

One of the women took the cloth and brought it to her nose. Then her eyes went wide. "This smell... It can't be! Can it?"

Maomao turned toward the woman with a slight smile on her lips, though she didn't let it reach her eyes. "I'll leave that to your imagination." She feared that actually saying Jinshi's name would be counterproductive. Let them get a whiff of the idea and fill in the rest themselves.

The woman with the sensitive nose was mumbling to herself: "Wait... But... Can it really...? Could it be *his*...?" Maomao couldn't be sure who she

was thinking of, but she saw she had a taker. When they saw the woman's reaction, the other two ladies with her took turns sniffing the handkerchief.

Maomao folded the cloth up and said respectfully, "Perhaps I could prevail on you to share your insights first?"

The palace women told Maomao that they'd spotted Shisui among the unkempt groves in the northern quarter. It made sense; that was where Maomao had run into her before. It was apparently a favorite spot of hers. Maomao went there and sat down among the trees. It being summer, there were a lot of noisy insects. The cicadas crying all around she could forgive, but she crushed a few mosquitoes that buzzed irritatingly past her ear.

Should've brought a little burner to keep the mosquitoes away, she thought. They used mugwort and pine needles to produce a thick smoke that kept the bugs at bay. One was always burning at the Jade Pavilion because Princess Lingli was still so young.

The area around the woods wasn't tended very carefully, and Maomao saw all kinds of things growing there: pampas grass, for example, and a bevy of red flowers. She leaned toward them. *So this is where they grow.* They were whiteblossom flowers. The trumpet-shaped blooms would start to open come evening.

Maomao picked one and crushed the petals, staining her fingers with a red juice. It was a little game she'd often played when she was young. Meanwhile, the courtesans had picked the flowers for their seeds, which contained a powder much like face-whitening powder. But that wasn't how the courtesans used it.

A question still lingered in Maomao's mind. It was about what had happened at the Crystal Pavilion a few days before, when Consorts Lihua's chief lady-in-waiting, Shin, had been found to be attempting to make a drug to induce a miscarriage.

Shin had never used any perfume before. If the stuff contained ingredients that could be harmful to a pregnancy, and if she felt it was she who should be consort, it would explain why she wouldn't want to wear it. She'd probably hoped to take Lihua's place. She might have thought that if the current consort failed to produce an heir, her family would feel compelled to give His Majesty someone else instead. And yet, on this occasion, she'd been so desperate to produce the abortifacient that she'd even worn the dreaded

perfume. Why?

Consort Lihua had been wearing looser clothing than usual. Outfits that didn't cinch around the belly, just like Consort Gyokuyou. And was it Maomao's imagination, or had she looked a little plumper than before?

Gyokuyou was hardly the only one who received the Emperor's visits. There was one very distinct possibility, but Maomao didn't dare say it. It wouldn't matter if she did; she was in no position to help Consort Lihua.

Her nagging doubt was about the ingredients involved in whatever Shin had been making in that storage shed. Anyone could have bought the perfume oils and such from the caravan, provided they had enough money. That much was obvious. And yet, Maomao found herself perplexed.

The courtesans gathered the whiteblossom seeds not for cosmetic purposes—but to create a drug that would rid them of a child in their belly. It would be boiled with other ingredients, including lantern plant, tree peony, balsam, flowering peony, and quicksilver to achieve the desired effect.

Quicksilver, or mercury, aside, these plants were all things that could be had in the rear palace, but Shin's brew hadn't included any of them—even though it seemed like the easiest and cheapest way. That left Maomao with an unsettling thought: maybe someone had deliberately told Shin about the toxins. That person might still be here in the rear palace.

She'd tried to give Jinshi an inkling of what she was thinking with an oblique suggestion, and she knew him well enough to expect he would look into the matter. She was less sure whether the proud, stubborn chief lady-in-waiting would be easily induced to talk.

At that moment, the cacophony of cicadas suddenly subsided.

Triiiing.

She heard what sounded like a bell ring quietly, followed by a distinct rustling. She turned toward the sound to discover something large crawling through the pampas grass. It hopped along like a frog, then raised its hands and started laughing merrily.

"I've got you this time!" it shrieked. The voice had the same touch of innocence as Xiaolan's, but was higher pitched. The owner of the voice had a grin on her face—a face that looked surprisingly young for how tall she was.

The woman, obviously pleased from the bottom of her heart, took the insect in her hands and put it in a bamboo insect cage.

I can't believe it, Maomao thought, watching the girl cackle as she hopped

around in the weeds grabbing at bugs. *They mistook me for* that*?* It was frustrating. She thought she was a *little* less deranged than that. Her curiosity satisfied, however, Maomao made to leave the area.

She didn't get far.

She heard it again: *triiiing*, this time from right by her ear. Puzzled, she touched her head—to discover a bug sitting on it. This, it seemed, was the true source of the "bell" she'd been hearing. And that would have been fine, if it had been the end of the matter.

Instead, a figure came charging at Maomao, colliding with her. "My bug!" it cried. Then the figure looked at Maomao in surprise. Her face reminded Maomao of a squirrel somehow.

"If you could get off me, I'd appreciate it," Maomao said, but the girl didn't move a muscle. Her hand was on top of Maomao's head, perfectly still. She looked a bit disturbed. Maomao quickly guessed what was going on. "Hurry up and take it away. I don't want to lie here with a bug on my head."

There had been a squelch when the girl had tackled her. Something had squished, and she knew what.

"I'm real sorry, Maomao," Shisui said, but she was grinning as she finally stood up.

It felt wonderful to pour the cold well water over her head—but she couldn't wash away the feeling of disgust.

The other girl handed the sopping Maomao a handkerchief. She took it gratefully and started mopping herself off. The insect cage hanging at the girl's waist was occupied by several bugs that were a sort of scorched color; they shook their wings, making a sound like a ringing bell.

"So that's what you were trying to catch?"

"Uh-huh." Shisui still looked a bit embarrassed, but her eyes as she turned to Maomao were shining. Maomao had known she liked insects, but she hadn't quite realized just how much.

While Maomao was still trying to decide what to do, she found the other girl pulling her around to the far side of the well. That side was shaded by the trees, and there was a wooden box, a perfect place to sit down. Shisui patted the box, directing her to sit.

Maomao was starting to get a very bad feeling about this. And her bad feelings were usually right.

“These bugs are native to the island country to the east, see? They make noise by vibrating their wings,” Shisui informed her, not looking up from the inhabitants of the cage. “I guess some of them must have hitched a ride with a trade mission and then gotten loose. I think this is the only place they live in our country, just like those moths.”

Maomao offered a half-hearted sound of interest.

“Their coloring makes them look like cockroaches, but they’re not, so don’t worry.”

Maomao could have lived without knowing that, she thought, once again rubbing her head vigorously with the handkerchief.

The girl with the poor choice of words delivered this meandering lecture on insects for a full thirty minutes. If this went on, the sun would be down before they were finished. Maomao kept trying to break her way out of the conversation and leave, but each time, she felt a tug on her sleeve and was drawn inexorably back into the lesson. She well understood wanting to talk about something you were interested in, but she wanted to alert Shisui to what a bore it was for her audience.

If only we were talking about drugs. Then I could survive this.

The uncomfortable stretch was soon abruptly interrupted by the clacking of a wooden clapper. Maomao looked around, trying to figure out where it had come from; she could see the other nearby palace women doing the same thing.

The source was soon revealed from the gate to the south. A figure appeared, flanked by a lady-in-waiting and a eunuch bodyguard to each side, with three more people trailing behind her, one of whom was sounding the clapper. The center of the parade was a woman dressed in colorful finery. Maomao thought she recognized her face, composed and gentle-looking.

I do believe that’s the Empress Dowager.

She’d only seen her once, at the garden party the year before, but there were only so many people who could progress through the rear palace with such an extensive entourage. Comparing the person in front of her to that hazy memory, she concluded it had to be the Empress Dowager. She looked altogether too young to be the mother of the current Emperor with his robust facial hair, but on she came, the clapper sounding all the while.

“Wonder where she’s going,” Shisui whispered. She was crouched in the shadows of a building.

"Why are you hiding?" Maomao asked.

"Well, aren't you?"

Shisui had her there. In an almost conditioned reflex, Maomao had likewise crouched behind a pillar. All the other palace women around were bowing deeply. It had been drilled into everyone from the moment they arrived here that that was what one did when someone of higher status passed by. Strictly speaking, it was what Maomao should have done whenever Jinshi and his cohorts were present, but she'd gotten in the habit of forgetting lately.

That won't do, she thought. She had to maintain proper boundaries. Shaking her head, she resolved to do better in the future.

"Is she going in the direction of the clinic?" Shisui mused, putting her chin in her hand and watching the Empress Dowager. It was certainly true that the clinic was in the direction the parade was going.

"The clinic, huh..." Maomao wondered what the Empress Dowager would be doing going to the rear palace's *unofficial* medical office.

Quite unexpectedly, Shisui provided the answer. "I heard it was Her Ladyship who started it. That was back when the empress regnant was still at her most powerful, so she couldn't do it publicly, and even now it's still kept pretty quiet."

That would certainly make sense. The Empress Dowager was reputed to be a kindhearted woman. It was said to be by her influence that both slavery and the making of eunuchs had been forbidden upon the accession of the current Emperor. Either of those changes alone would have been revolutionary in its own right. Many people felt they were good choices from the perspective of simple humanity, but there were problematic knock-on effects.

The slave trade, for example, had been a form of business, and pulling it out from under things had brought certain sectors to a halt. There was also the question of where to draw the line as to what constituted slavery. When people were herded and sold like animals, that was clear enough, but what about those who effectively made themselves collateral on a debt? Technically, they had entered into something like an employment contract, but this could also be considered slavery. Bring that into the equation, and even the courtesans—at the moment, perfectly legal—could conceivably be considered slaves. Maomao remembered seeing the old madam discussing the possibility, pale-faced.

In short, although outwardly there was no more slavery in the land, everyone was aware that in many ways the practice had simply changed its name and adapted to the new social standards. Maomao had no interest in finer details than that and didn't know anything about them.

"I think I'd better be getting back," Shisui said, grabbing her insect cage and standing up. "Better watch out, Maomao. You'll get in trouble if you slack off here too long."

"Yeah, I guess."

She wondered if the Empress Dowager's walk in the direction of the clinic had something to do with the recent events at the Crystal Pavilion. If Her Ladyship was getting involved, there might soon be another revolution, this time in medical treatment at the rear palace. Maomao wished she could be a fly on *that* wall, but she was scared of what would happen if she was found eavesdropping, and anyway, Shisui was right—Maomao would really hear it from Hongniang if she was too late getting back.

Hmmm. She crossed her arms in thought. It seemed like the other ladies-in-waiting had been doing nothing but getting upset with her recently.

"I suppose I better get back," she said, and reluctantly headed for the Jade Pavilion.

When Maomao returned she was, quite unusually, made to do some actual cleaning. She was told to dust the windowsills with more than the usual attention to detail, and her work only passed muster on the third try. That's two failures. She was starting to wonder if Hongniang really was getting her back for her recent attitude, but when she saw that the other ladies-in-waiting each had to redo their work at least once, she figured it must be something else.

Someone must be coming, but who?

The only times they cleaned this carefully were when another consort was coming for a meal or a tea party. Such meetings had been suspended recently, and only consorts in whom they had the utmost confidence were received at the Jade Pavilion. Just as Maomao was wondering who might fit that description, the visitor arrived. It turned out to be the Empress Dowager herself.

"It's been too long, Lady Anshi." Consort Gyokuyou greeted her with a delicate smile and perfect posture. She was proving why *she* was the consort;

with the exception of Hongniang, her ladies-in-waiting all but wilted in Her Ladyship's presence.

The Empress Dowager's gaze fell to Gyokuyou's belly, but only for a second. Thus it was that Maomao learned Her Ladyship's name, Anshi, but she knew it was a name she would almost certainly never speak.

So that's what's going on, Maomao thought. As what amounted to Gyokuyou's mother-in-law, the Empress Dowager shared an implicit understanding with her. The fact that the deeply (and rightly) suspicious Gyokuyou would not only receive the Empress Dowager, but make her privy to the fact of her pregnancy, spoke to how deeply she trusted her. Or perhaps she was obliged to alert Her Ladyship. If one took the rumors about the Empress Dowager at face value, it seemed likely to be the former—but Maomao had no way of being sure.

As far as it went, she looked very good-tempered. Princess Lingli at first ignored her grandmother, but soon grew accustomed to the gentle Empress Dowager. Maomao tasted the food for poison, but, before she could leave, the Empress Dowager said, "You, dear—you're the attendant Jinshi sent, aren't you?"

How does she know that? Maomao wondered. And why was she condescending to speak to a mere food taster? Maomao wanted to ask but knew it might be rude, so she only said, "That's correct, ma'am," and bowed.

"Suiren told me. She said she'd finally found a girl worth the effort, but that she was going back to the rear palace."

Suiren was Jinshi's personal lady-in-waiting, a woman just entering old age. She'd never seemed like the affable type, but apparently she was old friends with the Empress Dowager.

"She was once my own lady-in-waiting, you know."

That would explain it. It was common for the daughters of officials to serve as ladies-in-waiting or nursemaids.

Then Her Ladyship glanced at Gyokuyou. The perceptive consort appeared to take her meaning immediately. "I'm so very sorry, Lady Anshi, but might you excuse me for a moment to put the princess down for her nap?" she said.

Hongniang was holding Lingli, who looked tired from playing with her grandmother. She was largely weaned by now, but it would do well enough as an excuse for Gyokuyou to leave the room. Hongniang went with her

mistress.

So it was that Maomao found herself in a room with the Empress Dowager.

“She does know how to take a hint, doesn’t she?” Her Ladyship said, sounding a touch amused. At that moment, she seemed less like Gyokuyou’s mother-in-law and more like her slightly older friend. Maomao wasn’t sure what she was supposed to be doing, so she stood politely and watched the Empress Dowager for any clues. Her Ladyship noticed and gestured to Maomao to sit in a chair.

“It seems you’ve helped resolve a great many problems for us,” she said. She clasped a glass full of ice to cool her palms. The ice was a gift she’d brought. Consort Gyokuyou couldn’t let her body get too cold, but she could put the ice in her mouth and enjoy it while it melted. The princess, meanwhile, had been devouring treats made of shaved ice with fruit juice on top.

Maomao replied, “I’ve only offered what knowledge I have that happened to fit the situation.” Maomao wasn’t spectacularly imaginative. It just so happened that the truth sometimes lurked among the things she knew, which were little more than a window into what her father had taught her. If they were to ask him directly, she believed he would have solved their problems in half the time it took her.

It would have been easy to take Maomao’s words as contrary, and indeed the lady-in-waiting standing beside the Empress Dowager—a woman of something past forty who exuded experience—was frowning. It was only the three of them here in this room.

Possible misunderstanding or no, however, Maomao wouldn’t be comfortable unless she prefaced the discussion with that disclaimer. She had no interest in overselling her own abilities, and she wanted the other woman to be clear about that. Some might say she was selling herself short, but this was one of Maomao’s tenets, and she would live by it.

“That’s enough for my purposes,” the Empress Dowager said. Her eyes went briefly to the ground, and it seemed to Maomao—she couldn’t be sure—that the kindness in them was replaced for an instant by something dull and vacant. “Whatever you’re able to do will be enough—but I want you to investigate something.”

The lady-in-waiting was watching the Empress Dowager, who slowly

shook her head as she looked at Maomao. “Do you suppose I’ve been cursed by the former emperor?”

It was quite a question for the Empress Dowager to ask. Quite a question indeed.

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Chapter 14: His Former Majesty

The simple truth was that one rarely heard good things about the previous emperor. A foolish ruler, he was called; a pathetic prince, the puppet of the empress regnant. Yes, he was called many things, but there was one name above all by which he was known in the rear palace: pedophile.

It was the only fitting term, considering that the Empress Dowager and the current Emperor differed in age by only a scant ten years or so. It was true enough that in this world, very young women were sometimes given as wives. Sometimes these were political matches, or else intended to pay off a debt. But this was the rear palace, where women of *marriageable* age were plenty, yet the former emperor had seemed to focus almost exclusively on the handful of younger girls.

It proved he was a pedophile; that much was fact, no matter what else one thought of him. The Empress Dowager had spoken of a curse, but Maomao wondered if it really benefited her to think that way. On Her Ladyship's belly was a scar left when she had given birth to the current Emperor. The birth canal of her still-developing body had been too small, leaving no choice but to cut the child out of her. And the one who had been made a eunuch specifically to help with this procedure was Maomao's unfortunate old man.

Perhaps the sacrifice had been worth it, for the boy who would become the reigning monarch grew up spirited and strong, and despite the surgery, the Empress Dowager went on to bear another child, His Majesty's younger brother.

At this point, however, Maomao had a thought. A terribly rude thought that might get her slapped in the face if she were to voice it. Namely, was the Imperial younger brother indeed the son of the prior emperor?

The younger boy, as Maomao understood it, was a year older than she was. That meant the Empress Dowager would have been in her late twenties at the time of his birth, no longer a young girl by any stretch. Maomao didn't care to pursue the matter; she felt that knowing anything about it would only make her life here harder.

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“I’d like to talk somewhere else, if possible,” the Empress Dowager had said, and thus Maomao now found herself outside the rear palace. They were still within the inner court, however, which was principally the residence of the Emperor and his children and queen. At the moment, there were upper consorts in the rear palace, but His Majesty had no proper spouse.

Of course, Maomao could hardly be there alone. Perhaps Her Ladyship had been planning this all along, because she’d arranged a tea party that would bring together all four of the upper consorts. It was quite a sight. Maomao had even spotted Consort Lishu around, but nervousness seemed to be getting the better of her, and she shambled about like a clockwork doll. Maomao mentally put her hands together and prayed for the consort’s good luck.

“What exactly do you think is going on here?” Yinghua asked with a sigh. She was wearing an outfit that was nicer, but not *too* much nicer, than her usual clothes. Maomao had done the same. She and Yinghua were both present as ladies-in-waiting to Consort Gyokuyou, as were Hongniang, Guiyuan, and Ailan. Gyokuyou had left her most trustworthy eunuch bodyguards to look after the Jade Pavilion.

“Good question...”

The upper consorts had each been given a room. Although they hadn’t gone very far, a tea party was always a place where women competed in glory, and Gyokuyou was accompanied by three eunuchs who all had their hands full wrangling baggage. That was evidently enough for her, but Lihua had brought five eunuchs, and Loulan no fewer than eight, a dizzying number. Incidentally, Lishu was accompanied by only four baggage carriers, a state of affairs her ladies-in-waiting seemed to find intensely disagreeable.

The room Gyokuyou had been given was pleasant, open to a cool breeze, and stocked with juices and luscious fruits for dessert. Once Maomao had taken a bite and confirmed the food was safe, everyone dug in. She hardly imagined the Empress Dowager would do anything as ridiculous as poison the snacks, but it was her job to check. What’s more, it would have been rude not to eat what had been prepared for them, so Maomao dutifully ate a little more. The food was delicious, as might have been expected of their hostess. Juicy grapes snapped delightfully in their mouths; maybe they’d been cooled with well water.

Since there was still time before the tea party started, Consort Gyokuyou

instructed her ladies to relax. As for the consort herself, she took the opportunity to doze a little. Tiredness was common in the first stage of pregnancy, but with Gyokuyou it seemed to be going on longer than usual. She slept sitting up so as not to disturb her hair, but a rounded cushion was placed on the chair for her comfort, and a pillow stuffed with cotton was set at her neck. Hongniang was ready with water to wake her up and tools to touch up her makeup. Happily for all of them, the princess was sleeping soundly with her mother.

The point of Yinghua's question seemed to be that it was strange that the Empress Dowager would invite Gyokuyou to a tea party knowing full well that she was pregnant.

"I know she'll probably try to be considerate about it, but still..."

Gyokuyou's pregnancy was by now an open secret, but actually having to sit there and drink tea with the others might invite some uncomfortable questions.

Consort Lihua probably won't be an issue, and I guess we don't have to worry about Consort Lishu either, Maomao thought.

Lihua and Gyokuyou had avoided antagonizing each other largely by avoiding each other, period. Lihua was too proud and dignified to sink to humiliating another person, and Gyokuyou was wise enough to know that picking a fight with Lihua, whose blood was more noble than her own, was not a good idea. Then there was Maomao's strong suspicion that Lihua herself was pregnant as well. The consort wouldn't want to talk too much about Gyokuyou's pregnancy lest she draw attention to her own.

As for Lishu, she could barely make a peep even in front of Gyokuyou; she was unlikely to be a problem now. If anyone in her party was apt to cause trouble, it would be her ladies-in-waiting, but only each consort's chief lady-in-waiting was to attend her, and Lishu's—her former food taster, who had since been promoted—would probably keep her mouth shut.

That left only Loulan, who was still an unknown quantity—and the Empress Dowager herself, whose motivations for calling this get-together remained mysterious. There were no particularly interesting rumors circulating about Loulan, other than the talk of how gaudy her outfits were. Even Lishu had at least one good story going around, which claimed that she'd once collapsed with a spontaneous nosebleed while reading some book. When she'd heard about it, Maomao had only hoped that nobody would ask

too many questions about what kind of book it had been.

"Maomao," Hongniang called.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Don't worry about doing the food tasting for the snacks at the tea party today. I'll handle it. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

In other words, it was imperative that they not imply that they even thought it might be possible there would be poison in the food served by the former queen. Bringing along a formal food taster would send the wrong message. However, that left the very real question of where responsibility would fall if there really was something in the food, so as a compromise, the chief ladies-in-waiting were to be served the same things as the consorts. It could hardly have been more annoying and roundabout if they'd tried.

"Meanwhile, the Empress Dowager herself wants to 'borrow' you for something." Hongniang was looking straight at Maomao, a slight frown on her face. "Do they want your help with some kind of problem *again*?"

Maomao didn't say anything for a moment, unsure whether she could or should do so, but her silence appeared to be answer enough for Hongniang.

"It doesn't matter. I don't suppose you could tell me, anyway. *However*." Here Hongniang strode up to Maomao, who involuntarily backed away until she was pinned against the wall. "Kindly *don't* do anything to betray Lady Gyokuyou."

"I wouldn't dream of making an enemy of you, Lady Hongniang..."

"Good enough," she said, backing away again, an uncommonly gentle smile on her face. "I do so want to stay on good terms with you, Maomao."

"Yes, of course."

Hongniang was well and truly fit to attend Consort Gyokuyou, Maomao thought. The other three girls might be a little flighty, but so long as the chief lady-in-waiting was here, all would be well. She'd just seen that firsthand.

"If you'd come with me, please." The woman who appeared to summon Maomao was the same middle-aged lady-in-waiting who'd been with the Empress Dowager on her visit to the Jade Pavilion. Maomao followed her through a covered walkway, until six pavilions came into view. Distinct wings fanned out from them, the position of whose windows and pillars showed that they were carefully delineated.

“This was what served as the rear palace before what we call the rear palace today was built,” the middle-aged woman said, as if she knew what Maomao must be wondering.

“I see, ma’am.” So the six pavilions must have been the consorts’ quarters, while the wings were where the other palace women had lived.

They walked in silence after that, passing between the pavilions toward a wing at the center. The area seemed unoccupied, yet the place looked clean. Maomao absently ran a finger along one of the windowsills and came up with not a speck of dust.

The building faced the central courtyard. The gravel in the dry landscape garden showed signs of having been raked recently. Maomao thought she saw the lady-in-waiting glance venomously at it.

“This is it.” They arrived at a room slightly larger than the others in the center of the structure. The lady-in-waiting slowly opened the door.

The moment she did so, a distinctive odor reached Maomao’s nose. She frowned instinctively, but then peeked into the chamber. There was a strange air in the tidy space. The cover on the bed was still pulled back, almost sliding off. There was a collection of brushes on the table, though some of them had fallen to the floor. And on the floor there was an odd stain. Next, Maomao glanced at the wall. It was slightly distended, seemingly having been patched over with wallpaper.

The lady-in-waiting didn’t so much as walk through the door. Even taking a single step into the room would probably have sent dust everywhere. The exterior was so clean, yet inside it was like this. Maybe no one had entered in order not to disturb the traces of whoever had once been here.

“What’s this?” Maomao asked.

“In the time of the emperor before last, a woman who rose from mere palace woman to lower consort lived here,” the other woman replied, her gaze remaining cold and her tone flat. “It was the chamber of the woman known as the empress regnant, the room where His Former Majesty was raised—and where he died.”

Suddenly, Maomao understood the woman’s distaste for the place.

After that, the lady-in-waiting took them to a different but equally empty room, through whose window they could watch the Empress Dowager at her tea party with the other ladies. If anything happened, they could go running to

her immediately.

The woman began to explain to Maomao that in the twilight of the former emperor's life, he and the empress regnant had spent much time shut away in that room. Perhaps it was the emperor's weakness of character (the woman speculated) that caused him to cling to that room as if to his memories.

After the empress regnant died, the former emperor quickly gave up the ghost, almost as if he were following her. And all in that room...

The empress regnant had looked vivacious to the very end, but she could well be said to have died old and full of years. The former emperor hadn't quite reached the same age, but he was long-lived compared to many people. Among his subjects—particularly the farmers—anyone who reached the age of sixty would be considered a venerable elder.

What about any of this, Maomao wondered, could be considered a curse?

"I *told* her there was no curse," the middle-aged lady-in-waiting said seriously. The Empress Dowager, however, had only shaken her head and repeated that she must be cursed. Every night, she wished she could just disappear.

"Does she have any specific proof that she's cursed?" Maomao asked.

The other woman's expression darkened for a moment. Apparently there was something that fit the bill. "After his soul departed, His Former Majesty lay in his mausoleum for an entire year."

It wasn't unheard of for a mistake to be made about a death, and for someone to "come back to life." Maomao thought of the woman who had eluded them all with the thornapple. That might be one reason for the long wait, but more fundamentally, there hadn't been time to complete the former emperor's burial site during his life. Leaving his body for a year would give them plenty of time to finish it up.

"That next year, His Current Majesty and Lady Anshi went to retrieve the body for burial, but..."

They discovered that the corpse lay untouched by any insects, had not desiccated, and indeed looked almost exactly as it had on the day of the emperor's death.

Maomao arched an eyebrow. "So it hadn't decomposed."

"That's right. The mausoleum stays cool in summer, but even taking that into account..."

It would have been one thing if they had put the dead monarch on ice, but

at room temperature, insects would inevitably gather, and the flesh would rot and dry out. Yet none of this had happened to the former emperor's body.

"His Majesty appeared quite perplexed. He even wondered if perhaps the body had been replaced with a very well-made doll, but in truth it was certainly His Former Majesty. When they went to retrieve the former empress dowager, they found her in an unspeakable state—but that's normal."

I see... All that had really happened was that the body hadn't decomposed, but that could certainly seem very strange. All people return to the earth, be they commoners or nobles. Maomao firmly believed that being born to a different social status didn't mean being made of different *stuff*.

"That building is scheduled to be demolished soon," the middle-aged woman said. "We'd like you to investigate the matter before that happens."

It had been something like six years since the former emperor had passed away. His corpse was in a grave far away somewhere, and that building could be said to be the last place left with any significant links to him. If the issue wasn't resolved before it was destroyed, the Empress Dowager would be left to wonder for the rest of her life.

Truth be told, Maomao already had an inkling of what might be going on. "Ma'am, might it be possible for me to enter that room?"

"Well, I..." It didn't appear to be a decision the woman was authorized to make on her own, but she said, "I understand. I'll ask about it."

She never took her eyes off the tea party as she spoke.

That night, Maomao didn't return to the Jade Pavilion, but for the first time in quite a while stayed at Jinshi's residence. It would put her in the best position to go back to that dusty room the next day. They would need the Emperor's permission, but if the Empress Dowager asked him, there was every chance he would agree. Jinshi facilitated the discussion, and soon things were clicking along nicely. She wondered if Suiren had been part of the talks.

To be quite honest, Maomao was afraid of how the chief lady-in-waiting would receive her when she did get back. *I think she's been taking it easy on me so far.* As Gyokuyou's chief lady-in-waiting, it was Hongniang's primary duty to protect the consort. She wasn't like Maomao, who on some level served both Gyokuyou and Jinshi. And no doubt she wasn't thrilled that Maomao was forever running off to the Crystal Pavilion as well.

Even Maomao wasn't always sure exactly what her position was. At the very least, she certainly intended no harm to Consort Gyokuyou. But that didn't mean she was willing to help try to bring down another consort.

Someone else was in the room Maomao used to occupy, so for today she found herself in Suiren's quarters. She was a little scared of the old lady, but kept telling herself that she meant no harm.

"Here, here's a change of clothes." Suiren handed her an unbleached robe, and she obediently changed into it. Suiren's quarters consisted of two adjacent rooms in a corner of Jinshi's residence. A cot had been brought in, and there were pretty furnishings all around. Overall, it was a step up from the rooms of the ladies-in-waiting at the Jade Pavilion.

"I would have been perfectly happy sleeping on a couch or something."

"But then I would have spent all night worrying about you!"

Maomao had nothing to say to that. Suiren was reading a book by a brightly burning candle (how indulgent!). Reading in the flickering light would make her eyes go bad, but she was so obviously enjoying herself as she flipped the pages that Maomao thought it might in fact be cruel to stop her.

"You're welcome to read something if you like, Maomao. Just pick something from the next room."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Books were precious, so she ought to seize the chance to read when she had it. She went into the next room, hoping there would be something that interested her. If the room with their beds had a unified cuteness, this one was packed with all manner of things, though they were diligently sorted and stored. The bookshelf was in one corner. Maomao started flipping through things, careful to keep the light at a safe distance lest the pages catch fire. Then she shut the book with a bang. Let's just say that no matter how she sliced it, it simply seemed that she and Suiren had different tastes.

Look at this stuff, Maomao thought. *She must be awfully young at heart...*

She was about to go back to the other room when a small box caught her eye. It looked pretty old, but fine gold thread was embroidered around the edge, and it had been carefully daubed with persimmon juice.

"Interested in that?"

Maomao turned back at the sound of Suiren's voice. "It's all right, ma'am. I wasn't planning to steal it or anything."

“I know,” she said, laughing as she came closer and picked up the small old box. She carried it into the next room, set it on the table, and opened the lid. Inside was a collection of children’s toys. “These were Master Jinshi’s favorites. He had lots and lots of toys, but he would only ever play with the ones he really liked.”

She picked up a carved wooden doll nostalgically. It was carefully sculpted, parts of it worn with use. How much it must have been played with to get like that when the hands that held it had never known dirt.

As fond as Suiren’s smile was, it was also sad. “What do you think of Master Jinshi, Maomao?” she asked.

That set Maomao back on her heels, but only for a second. The answer came to her quickly.

“I think he’s an excellent employer.”

In the sense that he gives me rare medicines.

“Is there nothing more beyond that feeling?”

Maomao shook her head awkwardly. Suiren put the doll back in the box, apparently accepting this. “You know, this toy... Once, Master Jinshi had gotten to where he would play with this and only this. So we quietly hid it from him, but that only sent him into a storm of tears. He was inconsolable. Gaoshun ran himself ragged trying to find something to replace it!”

“Why did you feel compelled to take it from him?” Maomao asked.

Suiren’s eyes drifted to the ground, and she smiled again, genuinely sad this time. “Because when he gets fixated on something, it becomes the only thing he sees. But he was not born to a position where that could be allowed. We had to push him to grow up, even if it was painful. That was what Master Jinshi’s honored mother wanted.”

Maomao didn’t say anything immediately, but she felt one of the mysteries that had nagged at her had been solved. The oddly childish side that Jinshi was increasingly showing her was part of who he truly was. Maomao had heard that being raised in a repressive environment could affect a person’s spirit. Maybe that was why Jinshi’s heart remained, on some level, that of a young boy. The strangest thing was that in spite of it all, everyone around him treated him always and only as the gorgeous eunuch.

Maomao gazed at the items in the box. Among them was a folded piece of paper; she took it and opened it. It appeared to be a drawing of a person, but Suiren plucked it out of her hands.

“Ah, that...” Suiren said. “So that’s where it went. I was told in no uncertain terms to get rid of it.” She almost sounded like she was talking to herself, and conflicting emotions played across her face. Finally, she put the paper away somewhere else.

I wonder what that was all about, Maomao thought. She got herself together and looked back at the toy box. One of the items inside was awfully primitive for a toy. It looked like a stone, but the surface was polished; it shone with a gold luster.

“May I touch this?” Maomao asked.

“Go ahead.”

“Incidentally, you wouldn’t happen to have any paper or a handkerchief, would you?”

“Will this do?”

Maomao took the square of paper Suiren offered her, cradling the rock with it and closing one eye to get a good look.

“I do wonder where he got it,” Suiren said. “He was never in the habit of collecting pebbles.”

She was smiling again, but Maomao’s expression grew harder. “You took it away from him immediately?”

“Yes. A stone from who knows where, well, it can’t be very clean.”

“You’re right. And you did the right thing.” Maomao returned the stone to the box, still wrapped in the paper. She took a deep breath and then said, “It’s toxic.”

“Good heavens!” Suiren said, sounding uncharacteristically out of sorts. Her face went pale and her eyes got wide.

“I’m very curious to know what’s going on, myself. How he got that thing.” Even as she spoke, though, a hypothesis was forming in Maomao’s mind. But she wanted more proof before she said anything about it aloud. “When he was very young, did Master Jinshi ever enter the inner court?” she asked.

“Yes, once in a while...”

The answer sounded ambiguous to Maomao, but she nodded.

“What is it, Maomao? What’s the matter?” Suiren asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t say anything yet. We’ll get to the bottom of things tomorrow. Just wait until then.”

Suiren looked like she was about to argue, but then she silently accepted

it. Without another word, she climbed into bed and put out the candle. Maomao likewise got into her cot and extinguished her light.

It was decided that the next day, Maomao would be allowed into the room in the company of Jinshi and the Empress Dowager. Frankly, she wasn't eager to make a big to-do out of it, uncomfortable with the possibility that her speculations might be wrong, but she was hardly in a position to refuse.

When the time came, Maomao bowed her head respectfully and entered the dusty room. White powder puffed up with every step, and a distinctive odor reached her nose. Part of it was mold, but there was something else.

The brushes on the floor looked odd: the tips were all flat and hardened.

Points to one obvious thing, Maomao thought, and then said, "Did His Former Majesty have an interest in painting?"

The others looked at each other, seemingly puzzled. The Empress Dowager, however, narrowed her eyes and said, "He painted me. Just once." She placed a hand on her chest as if sifting through old memories. "He claimed it was a secret to be kept in this room alone. That if the others knew, it would all be taken from him."

Everyone else was left dumbfounded. Jinshi in particular seemed to think he was maintaining his usual expression, but his fingertips were trembling, a tic of his that Maomao had picked up on recently.

Maomao knew nothing, not really, of the man who had been derided as an idiot, dismissed as the puppet of the empress regnant. Nor did she especially wish to know. But in order to discover the truth of the "curse," as she had been requested to do by the Empress Dowager, she was going to have to find out.

"So this was where he did his painting?" Maomao asked. No one answered. It seemed this was the first that most of them were learning of the former emperor's secret hobby.

"I can't be certain, but I can tell you that after he started coming to this room, he was always attended by the same man." The response came from the lady-in-waiting who served the Empress Dowager.

"Would it be possible to summon him? Right away?" Maomao asked.

"I believe he still works here..." the woman said. Gaoshun asked her for the details and sent a subordinate to find the man.

Meanwhile, Maomao asked, "May I touch these brushes?"

“Go ahead,” the Empress Dowager replied, and Maomao picked up one of the brushes and touched the tip. The bristles were harder than she’d expected. She sniffed at them and discovered that same distinctive smell.

She noticed some small, semi-translucent shards on the floor, like hard candy. She stared at them intently. Then, there: a trail of discolorations on the floor as well. It looked like someone had tried desperately to wipe them away. She studied those, too, and began to think it looked like there were more of them closer to the wall.

She stared at the wall, then reached out and touched it.

Huh?!

She was taken aback to discover the wall was springier than she expected. Could there be some kind of thick paper pasted over it? It had been covered liberally with paint, perhaps in hopes of strengthening the surface. The reason it came across as so plain was because the wallpaper—which was often used to help maintain a consistent temperature in a room but also had a prominent decorative function—was unpatterned and had begun to curl with time.

Maomao stared at the wall. At the wallpaper.

Could it be...

She was beginning to think she knew what the former emperor’s curse really was. In fact, she was feeling pretty sure—but she was also feeling like it was leading her to another fact she would have happily ignored.

“I’ve brought him, sirs and ladies,” Gaoshun’s subordinate said, as he ushered into the room a hunched, elderly man, so old that he appeared to have one foot in the grave already. It seemed odd somehow that many years ago, a man like this had been entrusted to serve in the room of one of the most noble inhabitants of this palace.

“You’re...” The Empress Dowager looked at the old man, who half-closed his eyes and bowed slowly.

“There’s something we’d like to ask you,” Maomao began, but the Empress Dowager shook her head gently.

“This man was once a state slave,” she said, and Maomao promptly understood.

State slaves were, as the expression implied, servants owned by the government, under a system that had existed in this country until just a few years before. With enough work, state slaves could earn their freedom, so on some level it was closer to the system of contractual servitude under which

the courtesans worked than to the popular conception of slavery as such. But even so, many of those under the system had suffered terrible treatment.

"He's unable to speak," Her Ladyship said.

Sometimes those who could not talk were chosen as servants—especially by nobles who lived their lives under the watchful eyes of those around them.

"There's something we'd like to ask you," Maomao repeated. The old man was hunched over, but he looked straight into Maomao's eyes. "When you cleaned this room, were there any paints around?"

The man didn't react to the question, only continued to stare at Maomao.

"We think something happened here."

Still no reaction. Maybe he was indicating that he had no interest in the chatterings of a little girl.

No, Maomao thought, *that's not it.* She thought he was hiding something. She could see the faint trembling of his wrinkled fingers, a shiver much like Jinshi's earlier. She didn't miss it when his eyes darted ever so briefly toward the wall. *Is there something in the wall there?* she wondered.

Maomao approached the wall once again. She felt over its surface, and as she did so, she noticed something.

"May I peel off this wallpaper?" she asked. It was the old man who reacted; he took a step forward, clearly somewhat in spite of himself. "May I?"

"If you believe it will help you understand, then go ahead," the Empress Dowager said. She knew the place was only going to be demolished soon anyway.

The man turned hollow eyes on Maomao, as if begging her to stop.

Afraid I can't. She had water and a brush prepared, then began to dampen the wallpaper. She took hold of a corner where it was already peeling and slowly began to pull it away. As she went, shock grew on the faces around her.

That would explain the springiness, Maomao thought. There was another piece of wallpaper under the one she had pulled back.

"What's this?" Jinshi said, studying it closely. The newly exposed sheet of paper was in a terrible state from having had wallpaper put over it, but even so, it was clear it hadn't been designed to adorn a wall.

It was a painting, discernible even despite its faded colors. In the center was what appeared to be an adult woman, surrounded by younger ladies.

Even in its sorry state, there was something about the picture that tugged at the heartstrings. It wasn't the materials the artist had used or even the technique he had employed: it seemed to hold a message within it.

It looks strangely familiar...

That was it: the picture she'd glimpsed the night before. Suiren had snatched it away from her before she got a good look at it, but the way the figure was drawn was very similar.

Maomao couldn't have cared less what kind of person the former emperor had been. She was thinking only about how, by simple virtue of the fact that he stood at the zenith of his country's hierarchy, he had died without the chance to exercise his true vocation. The paintings made it impossible to deny.

When Maomao had finished peeling away the wallpaper, she inspected the surface of the picture.

I knew it. She could see daubs of golden paint. It was a brilliant color, also much like something she'd seen the previous night: the stone in Jinshi's toy box.

"This paint here—I suspect it was made by pulverizing a rock that has the toxic qualities of arsenic."

There was a kind of stone known as orpiment, which could be crushed to produce a striking yellow pigment known as "orpiment gold."

Paints were made by mixing the pigment source with liquid, and at first Maomao had thought perhaps His Former Majesty had been unwittingly exposed to some toxic substance used in the wallpaper. But when she learned that a young Jinshi had found an orpiment stone in the palace, and then when she had seen the strange shape of the brushes in this room, she'd begun to entertain a different possibility. Either way, the former emperor hadn't suddenly ingested a large dose of the toxin; rather, his body had absorbed it gradually over time.

"Arsenic has a preservative effect. It prevents rotting."

At the time of the sovereign's death, his body had probably been full of the stuff. The doctors would have been aware of the possibility, but they wouldn't have known exactly where it had come from. They didn't have the authority to tell the emperor what he could and couldn't do; they could only confirm it hadn't been mixed into his food.

Painting pictures would be viewed as a base pastime for one who stood at

the top of his nation's hierarchy, at least by many. So this man, who was treated like an idiot already anyway, had chosen to hide his hobby, even taking on a mute slave to guard the room where he engaged in it.

Maomao let her hand brush the wall. There was still a certain springy quality even though they'd removed one layer of wallpaper. Most likely, each time the emperor had finished a picture, he'd pasted it in here under a layer of the stuff. There must be quite a few more works here.

Maomao still had a question, though, about the emperor's painting supplies. The surface of the wallpaper was coated with glue or the like to help pigment adhere easily to it. That accounted for the clear shards she'd found earlier. Likely, he'd been dissolving them to make his paints. As for the brushes, as long as one had access to animal hair, one could make one's own brushes, but what about the reams of paper and piles of stones—the ingredients for pigments—that would be necessary? They couldn't be found just anywhere.

Maomao stood looking at the faded golden hue of the orpiment and thought. It seemed to her that everyone here would know who the subject of the painting was, this one adult woman. He'd hardly ever looked at a grown woman, even as a shadow at which he was unable to gaze for long loomed behind him.

The empress regnant must have known, Maomao thought. Must have realized that her own son wasn't fit for the throne. That was why she'd consolidated power into her own hands and worked hard to protect him. To keep safe her child who had all but stumbled into leadership. It was how she had become known practically as an empress in her own right. How ironic it would be, then, if her last gift to her son had been this place and those painting supplies.

Maomao didn't say any of this, but quietly left the room, glancing at the former slave to try to confirm what she was thinking. He, though, had his eyes closed, his head bowed as if in prayer. Perhaps he had been the one who received the supplies from the empress regnant and brought them to His Majesty—neither of them knowing that the gifts were poisonous.

The Empress Dowager, in contrast, was gazing up into the sky, as if putting a question to someone somewhere beyond the sapphire vault that arched above them. Maybe she had a sentimental streak that inspired the gesture. Maomao shook her head.

She bowed in deference. “I’ve told you all I can.”

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Anshi slowly reached out toward the wall, still covered haphazardly with pieces of paper, a self-recriminating smile on her face. This palace woman, Maomao, had given her ample explanation and more. Indeed, perhaps she had led her to things that would have been better left unknown.

Anshi knew perfectly well who the woman was in the middle of the painting on the wall. Though her image was faded, her *presence* was undiminished.

Which one was she? Maybe she was one of the young women surrounding the central figure, but then again, she might not even be among their number. Maybe she’d been nothing more than transient for him, someone simply passing by. The thought made anger surge within her. She touched her belly, the scar she knew was there. It was this scar that had made her what she now was, mother to the country. People regarded Anshi as an object of pity, or occasionally of amusement. Some expressed sympathy for her, the poor little girl His Former Majesty had just happened to get pregnant.

It was true, he *had* impregnated a young woman. But Anshi had been aware of the ruler’s sexual proclivities in advance. Her father had been a civil official, and Anshi his illegitimate daughter. It so happened that she’d had her first period sooner than other girls her age—and that she had always looked younger than she was. Her father had simply seen a convenient tool and used it.

She closed her eyes and remembered the day.

One of her relatives had been a eunuch at the rear palace, well-versed in the emperor’s behavior. Once every several days he would visit the rear palace and make the rounds of the upper consorts. Sometimes he visited the middle consorts as well—but never did he stay the night. He might take a meandering walk through the gardens, but sooner rather than later, he would leave.

Anshi entered service as a lady-in-waiting to one of the middle consorts, an older half-sister of hers. The older woman knew nothing of Anshi’s father’s plans and spent all her time pining away, hoping His Majesty would

come to her. And indeed he did, giving Anshi her chance rather sooner than she had expected. Guided by a eunuch, the sovereign came to see his newest middle consort. Even at her young age, Anshi could see he wasn't very interested in the visit, although her half-sister, whose every thought was of attracting the emperor's attention, appeared oblivious to the fact.

She didn't remember how exactly it had started. Just that suddenly, the emperor was shoving her sister aside, causing her to tumble to the ground. He himself leaned against the wall, his face cast down.

The proper thing for a lady-in-waiting to do in such a situation would have been either to go to comfort her mistress, or else to apologize to the ruler for whatever impertinence had provoked him. But Anshi did neither. Instead she said, "Are you quite all right, sir?"

This might have been considered improper in its own right; indeed, the eunuchs around His Majesty told her forcefully not to touch him and pushed her away. She thought she might be punished along with her half-sister, but things turned out quite differently.

All her half-sister had tried to do was to touch the emperor, and only gently at that. She'd dreamed of the rear palace, and now she was there, and her sovereign was more beautiful than she had ever imagined. Raised to be a butterfly, to be a flower, Anshi's half-sister had simply gotten carried away.

Anshi, though, had caught a glimpse of the emperor's expression as he stared down at the ground. His willow-like eyebrows were knit together and tears poured from his eyes. It must have been his left arm her half-sister had touched, because he was rubbing it vigorously as if to get rid of the sensation. This was not the image of a man who stood at the top of his nation. It was a weakling terrified by a middle consort who could barely pull herself up off the floor.

And who should approach that timorous man but a heedless ten-year-old girl.

Time passed, and as Anshi ceased to look like a little girl, the emperor stopped making any effort to visit her. Perhaps she, too, had now become the object of his fear. Anshi's half-sister had been driven mad by jealousy; she had ultimately been married off to get her out of the rear palace, and what became of her after that, Anshi never learned. She'd heard that years later, her half-sister had died of illness, but by then Anshi was already Empress

Dowager and in mourning for her husband, so she was unable to attend the funeral.

She was hardly the last little girl to arrive at the rear palace with the task of drawing His Majesty's interest; many came after her. The rear palace grew swiftly, and three new zones were added. The segment constructed when her husband had acceded to the throne was now the southern quarter.

Anshi found her life threatened many times. It was her good fortune that her child had been a boy, and that its grandmother, the empress regnant, had acknowledged it. Once, the emperor had refused to acknowledge a daughter born to one of his ladies, leading both the child and the medical officer thought to be its father to be banished. Until then, medical officials had been the only men exempt from castration while serving in the rear palace, but after that event it was declared that even doctors would have to be eunuchs. It pained Anshi to know that this was why the physician who had operated on her belly had had to be castrated.

When the emperor had been doing his paintings here, she supposed he'd been thinking only of his mother, the empress regnant, or otherwise of girls who wouldn't challenge him. *She* had no place in such imaginings. The sovereign had become as terrified of her as he had been of her half-sister who had tried to touch him. Perhaps even more.

When her second child was born, there were those who thought it must be illegitimate, but Anshi only laughed. That could never be.

She'd never seen His Majesty so scared. He was nothing more than the empress regnant's puppet, a pathetic man who was overwhelmed by adult women, able to engage only with little girls. To be forgotten by the likes of *that*—it was unbearable. The feelings had exploded when she'd seen the emperor pass her by completely to go be with his new favorite playmate.

Anshi had confronted him with the scar on her belly, tormented him as he begged for forgiveness. Yet to her it felt like nothing compared to what he'd inflicted on all those little girls. In bed she'd continued to whisper spiteful curses to him, as if to wound him more than he had all of those children put together. So that he would remember her, more than any of the girls he had hurt and was still hurting, more than his august mother the empress regnant.

What kind of picture had *that* been?

Just once, the emperor had painted Anshi. He'd looked so at peace as he worked away with his brush. Painting. His little secret. She'd cherished the

painting, but had later told her lady-in-waiting to throw it away. Anshi had no more need for the former emperor. Just as he'd had no more need of her.

When she had realized her child might be in danger, she'd acted quickly and decisively. Let people say he was illegitimate, or a changeling; she loved him just the same.

It was then that she began to realize something she hadn't understood clearly before. Anshi took a step back from the picture on the wall. Outside the room stood the lady-in-waiting who was always with her, turning her glance to one side and occasionally fidgeting.

There on the wall was a face so beautiful it could only be called superhuman. It resembled someone Anshi had once known, someone who had astonished even her with their beauty. But that person was gone, and the painting was from decades ago. There would be few left who could identify the image.

"I recall he came to visit us once, did he not?"

"Yes," said Anshi. "How many years ago that was..."

With her was a man by the name of Jinshi. He was referring to something that had happened more than ten years ago. It must have been around the time the former emperor had begun to shut himself up in this building. He was already losing his grip on reality by then. Anshi didn't wish to pursue the question of why.

The empress regnant had come quickly, she remembered, comforting her beloved son and taking him away.

"That was when I picked this up," Jinshi said, showing her a golden stone he held in a handkerchief. "I'm given to understand it's called orpiment." She was impressed by his detachment. So the poison had been ravaging His Former Majesty even then. "Suiren finally gave it back to me just this morning."

Precisely as Anshi had once instructed her, all those years ago: *if he plays too much with one thing, take it away from him.*

So that was what they had done, never understanding how cruel it really was. Each time the boy had looked up at her, seeking to judge her mood, she'd reflexively avoided his gaze. It was a terrible thing she had done. Perhaps that was what had caused him to grow up so fast, while a child's heart still beat within him.

"I seem to remember having seen one of his drawings once. It depicted a

young woman in delicate colors. Perhaps this color sparked a memory in me because of that picture."

So Suiren had quietly kept the painting Anshi had told her to throw away.

"You always did like to wear yellow," Jinshi continued.

It was only happenstance. Her family had produced a great deal of turmeric, and the clothing she'd worn had therefore naturally included much yellow. She'd simply never stopped wearing it.

Finally he asked, "Is the woman in that picture indeed the empress regnant?"

"I certainly don't know."

"What do you suppose he was trying to communicate at that moment?"

"I certainly don't know."

Nor was there any way to find out now. It was her choice to not even ask the question.

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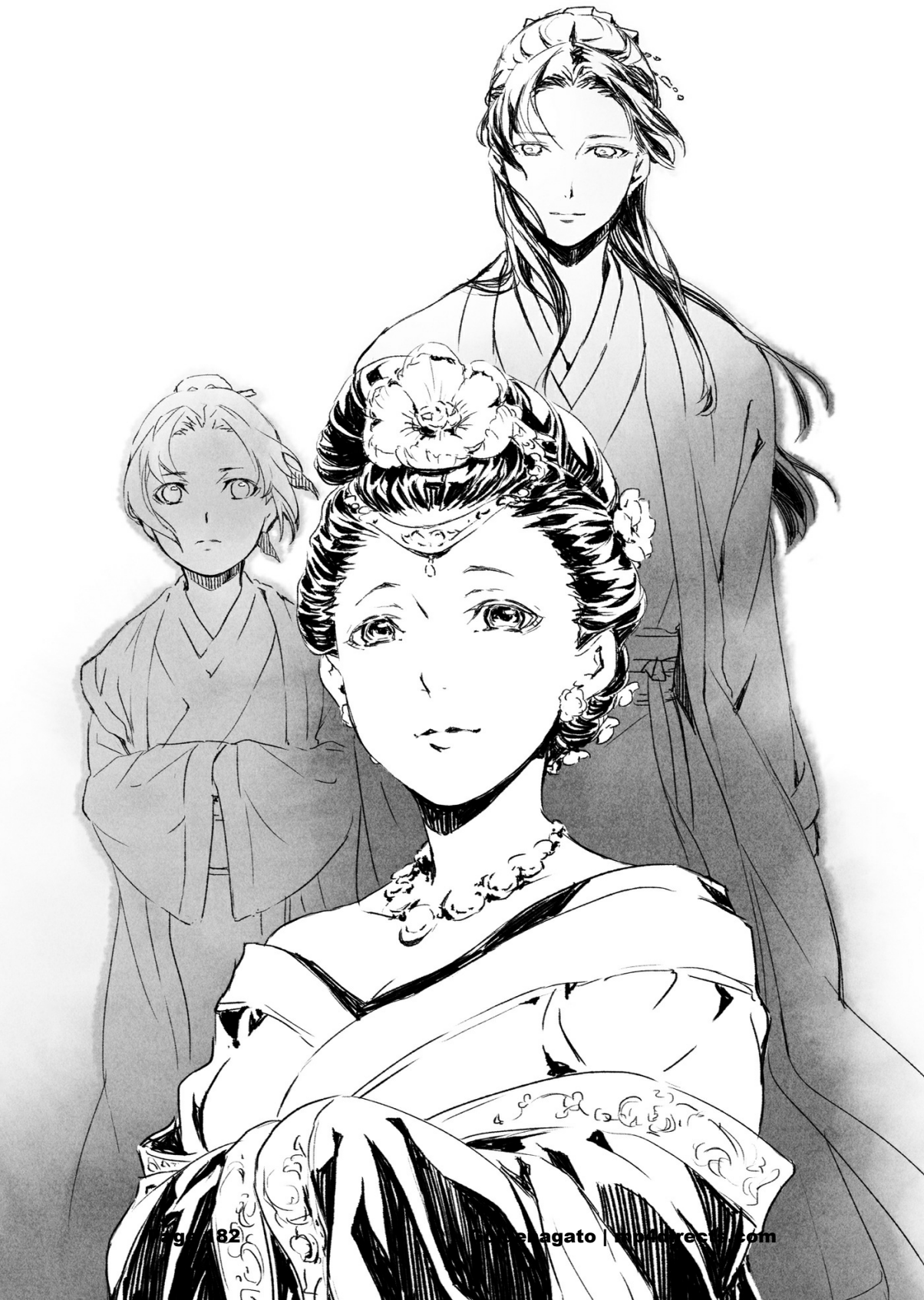

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“I see you’ve found yourself quite an interesting palace woman,” Anshi said in an attempt to change the subject.

“Someone who’s quite useful.”

It was true; she could hear it in his voice—but she could also tell it wasn’t everything. She’d fought and survived on this battlefield far longer than he. How many years did he think she had been watching him?

“I see.” She half-closed her eyes, feeling she had to communicate this much at least: “But if you don’t take care to hide your favorites, someone might hide them from you.”

And with that, Anshi returned to her own room.

Chapter 15: Scary Stories

The long-promised new palace women finally arrived. Three of them came to the Jade Pavilion; everyone but Maomao seemed to know them already. Maomao observed the three newcomers and immediately thought: *Hmm. Their names don't match their looks.*

Maomao only really remembered things that interested her, so it was hard for her to start conversations with the new girls for a while. Well, she'd never been that much of a talker to begin with, so a simple "Hey, you!" would work. There was a bigger problem to address.

"Maomao, it's *time* for you to go *back* to your *room*," Yinghua said, her hands on her hips.

"I was told this was my room!" Maomao replied, all but clinging to the small storage shed that she'd been given in the Jade Pavilion garden. She'd stocked it full of tools and dried herbs—why, she'd finally finished moving them all from her former quarters.

"That was just a joke, obviously! Why would you take it so seriously?"

What kind of example would this set for the new girls? Yinghua wanted to know.

"It's no problem. Just let me stay here."

"You can't! Come on, the girls are looking at us!" They made quite a sight, Maomao clinging to a post in the shed and Yinghua trying to detach her from it. Chief lady-in-waiting Hongniang would never stand for two of her subordinates making such a display: Maomao and Yinghua both took a good smack.

Maomao moved back to her old room, in the end. When she saw the scads of equipment and ingredients in the storage shed, though, Hongniang seemed at last to accept the reality; she reported the matter to Consort Gyokuyou, and the consort, ever partial to interesting things, laughed and said Maomao could do as she wished with the shed. She had to sleep in her quarters, but otherwise she could do what she liked.

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Maomao marveled at what a fine boss she had, but Yinghua, predictably, looked put out. Now she watched as Maomao gleefully began working in the little building. The tea party was over, and they had no more obligations until dinner. With the three new girls, the amount of work any one of them had to do had plummeted.

Sigh. This won't do.

That remark Yinghua had made—Maomao didn't really think it was any of her business, but she'd said it out of concern for Maomao, probably in hopes that she would start getting along with the newcomers sooner rather than later. At snack time today, she'd likewise tried hard to get Maomao and the new trio all involved in the conversation. Yinghua was thoughtful that way.

Maomao set down the polyporaceae mushroom she was holding and looked out of the storage shed at Yinghua. After a moment she said, "I'm sorry. I know I've been a bit self-absorbed."

"It's all the same to me," Yinghua said, her lips still pursed. Maomao watched her, not quite daring to come out from behind the wall. "I mean, you can do what you want. But..." Yinghua turned so the wall was between her and Maomao, and then she said, "I'm going to borrow you this evening, all right?" Then she grabbed Maomao's hand and grinned a rather intimidating grin.

Yipes.

"We're the only ones who are free tonight, Maomao! It's perfect timing!" She shook Maomao's hand vigorously, obviously really enthused.

She got me, Maomao thought, heaving a sigh and staring at the shrewd lady-in-waiting.

Maomao found herself brought to a dilapidated building in the rear palace's northern quarter. She'd worried that Hongniang wouldn't give them permission to go out so late at night, but she'd been surprisingly willing. "A person ought to be a part of that sort of thing from time to time," she'd said.

"That sort of thing"? Maomao wondered what was going on, but she'd followed Yinghua nonetheless as they walked by the light of a small lantern. The breeze was overwarm and uncomfortable, and she kept hearing bugs buzz around her ears, but she didn't complain. They stopped at the entrance to the building. "Here, Maomao, put this on." Yinghua held out a thin cloth.

“Isn’t it going to be hot?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll cool down soon. C’mon.”

Maomao was perplexed but did as she was told. Yinghua rapped on the door, and a palace woman appeared from inside.

“Welcome. Two participants, yes?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“A pleasure to have you.”

Yinghua bowed, and Maomao followed her lead. The woman who’d met them smiled and gave them each a small flame, but asked them to put out their lantern. She was beautiful even by the dim light, but perhaps a little older than the average inhabitant of the rear palace.

The inside of the building looked every bit as weathered as the outside. Not so much like it had worn over time, but as if it had declined rapidly after people had stopped using it. It had been minimally cleaned, but some of the fittings were poor and the floor creaked.

“This building was used in the time of the last emperor,” the woman informed them. As populous as the rear palace looked now, there had actually been more women here during the reign of the previous monarch. Women gathered from all over the nation, shut away in here to bear a son for the sovereign. Now, with fewer ladies, this place went uninhabited, though at moments like this it might still be used. But what was it being used for?

When they arrived at a large room at the end of the hallway, about ten other people were already there, sitting in a circle, their faces mostly covered with pieces of cloth. Each held a flickering flame, giving the place an eerie ambience.

What were they doing here? What else did one do on a summer night?

“Very well. Let us begin.” The woman who’d greeted them sat down. It appeared she was the hostess. “Does everyone have their story ready?” She produced a handful of twigs to serve as lots. “Tonight,” she said, “we shall savor thirteen tales to chill the blood.” The way the light danced across her grinning face made her truly unsettling.

Evidently, Maomao was in for a night of scary stories.

One woman sat at each of the four points of the compass, with two more in between each of them. Maomao held back a sigh as she sat there with a cloth over her head, half hiding her face. The first woman to speak seemed a

little nervous, delivering her story in such a halting manner that it was hard to take it seriously. The story itself amounted to little more than one of the various rear-palace rumors, hardly enough to make the blood run cold.

As the second storyteller was about to get started, Maomao felt a jab from her right. It couldn't have been Yinghua, who was sitting to her left.

"Evening!" a sweet voice whispered.

"Hello," Maomao said. She recognized the other woman, even with half her face covered: it was Shisui. In the low light, she hadn't noticed her until now.

Shisui sleepily offered something to Maomao. She thought she caught a whiff of the seashore—then realized it was dried squid.

"Want some?" Shisui asked.

"Yes!" Maomao took a big bite, chewing slowly so as not to make any noise.

The second woman told a perfectly unremarkable scary story, but at least it *was* a scary story, unlike the first woman's attempt, and she managed to spook a few of the attendees. Indeed, the cloth slipped from Yinghua's face, and from time to time she could be seen peeking out from between her fingers. That was her business, but she would also occasionally cling to Maomao. She was awfully strong for her relatively small size, and a couple of times Maomao was almost strangled.

So she's a scaredy-cat, but she still enjoys this, Maomao thought. It wasn't that unusual. She'd probably invited Maomao along because she was afraid to come alone.

Maomao wasn't particularly fond of storytelling get-togethers like this, but they seemed to be widely accepted in the rear palace, where there were so few amusements. After all, even Hongniang had agreed to let them come here, and Shisui was present as well—although Maomao had the feeling Shisui would have managed to show up with or without permission.

And so it went, until half the women had told stories. Each time one of the tales was over, one of the lights in the room was extinguished, so that now there was half as much illumination as there had been at the beginning. The seventh woman's turn to tell a story came. Maomao listened vacantly, chewing on a mouthful of squid. The woman's flame flickered on her pale face as she began to speak.

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This is a story from my hometown. There's a forest there, which everyone has always been told not to go into. They say if you do, you'll be cursed, and your soul will be consumed by ghosts. One time, though, there was someone who didn't listen. Someone who went in anyway.

See, that year, the harvest had been especially bad. Not quite bad enough to starve, but there was one house where the breadwinner had just died, leaving only a child and its mother. No one had enough extra resources to help them, and the child was constantly hungry.

One day, the child went into the forbidden forest, thinking maybe there was something to eat in there, and in fact they came back with all kinds of nuts and berries, which they showed their mother, smiling. "There's lots to eat in there," they told her.

She tried to prevent the child from saying any more, but it was too late. The village chief summoned them and reminded them not to go into the woods. After that, they had no choice but to stay away from the forest. After all, otherwise they would have been ostracized by the entire village. It didn't matter how much food there was in there—they just had to give up on it.

But then something very strange happened. That night, some people saw a flickering light floating near the house of the mother and her child—and come the next morning, the woman and her child had collapsed.

The villagers, fearful of the curse, wouldn't go near them, and before long they died. The child went first. Before the mother died, however, she said, "Listen. I have something wonderful to tell you." She smiled as she said it, and as she attempted to tell them whatever it was, she died.

Even today no one in my village knows what she wanted to say, but everyone stays away from those woods. Well, almost everyone. Once in a while, somebody decides to go in anyway. And when they do, that night, a little dancing flame visits their house and steals their soul.

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Huh, I get it, Maomao thought, listening to this basically quite common story as if it all made sense to her. In her mind, it didn't exactly have a real "scare" in it, but everyone else was shivering as they listened. It was probably

the atmosphere in the room; it was designed to cause that sort of reaction.

She finally swallowed the dried squid, which had gotten nice and soft, and a new piece was promptly offered to her. “You look awfully calm,” Shisui whispered to her. Like Maomao, she showed no sign of having been unsettled by the story.

“I guess.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Revealing the secret behind the story here and now would only spoil things. But often, such stories contained a kernel of truth.

Maomao listened as the tales rolled on. Yinghua continued to grip her hand tightly, grabbing onto her anytime anything remotely frightening came up.

In due course, it was Shisui’s turn to tell a story. Maomao rubbed her eyes. She was feeling lethargic and tired. Not only had they packed more than ten people into a small room, everyone was wearing copious perfume, maybe self-conscious of any body odor. Maomao, with her keen nose, was getting a little tipsy on the aroma.

Shisui, meanwhile, slid the cloth off her head and held her flame up near her face. She’d always looked young for how tall she was, but her balanced features took on a certain imposing authority in the dancing light.

“This is a story that comes from a country far to the east,” she said, lowering her girlish voice for effect. Gradually, she ceased to sound like a young woman and began to remind Maomao of a veteran storyteller.

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In this land there was a famous monk. One day, the lord of the neighboring province died, and the monk went to perform the funeral. This story is about his journey home.

There were two mountain ranges the monk had to cross on his way back to his own temple. The journey was impossible to make in a single day, so the monk would be obliged to find lodging for the night.

The going had been easy. The weather had been fair and the distance had passed quickly, and finally the monk had decided to stay the night at the temple of another monk he knew.

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Thinking that the return journey would be just as pleasant as the way over, the monk was surprised to find his feet felt oddly heavy on the way back. The sun was already sinking before he had covered two-thirds of the distance he'd expected to, and he was nowhere near the temple at which he'd planned to spend the night. This monk was observing particularly rigorous strictures, so he had no attendants and no horse.

Looks like I've made a misjudgment...

He was on a wide plain full of pampas grass, and he could hear wild dogs howling in the distance. If he tried to camp out, they might attack him. So the monk picked up his pace, and soon he came upon an old peasant hovel with a thatched roof. He hurried up to the door and knocked.

Pardon me! Is anyone home?

From the hovel emerged a young couple. The monk explained his situation and begged them to let him stay the night, even if he had to sleep in the corner of a storeroom.

My, but you must be tired from the road.

The young wife received the monk most hospitably. She offered him eggplant and cucumber, and although she claimed they were nothing special, he found them quite delicious. The husband, for his part, watched the monk with suspicion. And who could blame him, with an unknown traveler suddenly arriving at a young couple's home?

The monk had few possessions, including only the scantest amount of money to pay for lodging. Yet the couple treated him as an honored guest, preparing a place for him to sleep in the next room.

Deeply grateful for the soft bed, the monk wondered if there was anything he could do to repay them. About the only thing he could think of was to chant a sutra, and so that was what he did, sitting down and intoning a holy text. Normally, he was utterly focused while reciting the scriptures, but today he was oddly, acutely aware of the sounds around him. He could hear the wind in the grass, along with a noise rather like a bell. Insects, maybe.

The monk continued to chant, but he listened closely, and then he realized that the bell-like sound was a person's voice.

What shall we do, dear?

It was the lady of the house.

Nothing to *do. It's enough.*

Another bell: the husband's voice. The monk thought they sounded

strange, but once he had begun chanting a sutra, he never stopped until he was finished.

Now, now, dear, that will never do. I don't want to be left alone.

The woman was raising her voice. They didn't seem to think the monk could hear them, but his ears were better than the average person's. He knew it was wrong to eavesdrop and tried to make himself focus on his chanting, but he couldn't stop the voices from reaching his ears.

You can think what you want. (The wife again.) I'm going to do it anyway.

Do what, exactly?

The monk felt a shiver run down his spine. Should he stop chanting and intervene in the argument, or—?

No. No, he couldn't stop chanting. He had to continue reciting the holy text. He wasn't sure why; he just felt it.

Yes, why? Why was his whole body trembling? He had goosebumps everywhere, right up to the top of his head, which had been shaven bald for so long.

What is this?

Come, let's do it.

The unsteady sliding door hushed open, revealing the woman holding a hatchet, her eyes wild. The monk let his eyes shift to look at her, but with his mouth he continued chanting.

Where's that monk? Where'd he go?

The woman swiped with her hatchet just in front of the monk. Whoosh! *But she seemed not to notice him.*

Where is he?! Did he run away?

The woman left the room, her shadow stretching out, forming strange shapes. Inhuman shapes. And then another bizarre shadow joined her.

Search, my love. We must find him. Or else... Or else...

The woman was in a panic. Why was she panicking?

Otherwise, you...

There was a triiing*, like a bell. Then there came a munching, as of someone chewing up paper.*

The chewing went on and on. All throughout it, the monk never stopped chanting the holy sutra.

The moment the sound stopped, he went outside. He didn't say his farewells to the young couple, didn't look at them, simply left the house.

There, he found an insect's brownish wings lying on the ground.

Triiing, triiing.

He heard the sound of a bug from the pampas grass, and then it faded.

The monk brought his hands together in prayer over the tattered insect wing, and then, still chanting, he walked off into the night.

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Everyone listened raptly to Shisui's story. Maomao reflected on how important intonation and delivery were: usually so airheaded and innocent, when she was telling her story, Shisui sounded like a completely different person. She looked it, too, with the light of the flame flickering across her face.

She almost looks...familiar, somehow, Maomao thought absently as she regarded Shisui in profile, but then the other girl looked at Maomao and grinned. She blew out her flame, disposing of the wick and oil in the brazier in the middle of the room.

"Okay, you're next," Shisui said, smiling guilelessly once more. Ah, yes, Maomao realized—if she was going to come to a scary-story convocation, she was eventually going to have to tell one herself. She nodded.

What should I say?

Maomao wasn't the type to believe in these kinds of tales, which made it hard for her to come up with anything compelling. Left without any other options, she decided to tell a story she'd heard from her old man.

"This happened some decades ago," she began. "It was claimed that a small, floating flame, said to be a wandering human soul, appeared near a graveyard." Now that Maomao was the storyteller, Yinghua let go of her, pulling her cloth around herself until only her eyes were peeking out. "Thinking it most peculiar, some brave young people decided to go find out the truth of the matter. And when they did..."

Maomao could see Yinghua biting her lip. If she was so scared, she should just cover her ears, Maomao thought.

"...they discovered that the explanation was perfectly mundane. A man who lived in the area had been walking among the graves. Someone had just *said* the light was a restless soul." Unfortunately, the story she was telling wasn't quite the eerie tale everyone had been expecting. Yinghua let out a

breath that seemed at once relieved and disappointed. “He was just an ordinary grave robber.”

Yinghua’s forehead struck Maomao’s shoulder with a *whack*. Then she looked straight at Maomao and said, “Grave robber?”

“Yes. He was obsessed with some bizarre curse, and was trying to make a concoction that was supposed to work on all kinds of illnesses. You grind up human livers, then smear them all over your body...”

Whack. This time Yinghua connected with Maomao’s forehead.

“That’s the story,” Maomao said, rubbing her head.

Yinghua was next, but her story was something less than coherent. Nonetheless, she got through it, and then there was only one light left. Holding it was the woman who had greeted them.

Come to think of it...

With a woman seated at each point of the compass, and two more in between each of them, that came to twelve attendees. But this woman had said thirteen stories. Maomao wondered what was going on here.

The last woman told a tale of the time of the former emperor. She spoke of a moment when the population of palace women had grown too large, when only a handful of them were His Majesty’s bedfellows.

Maomao just couldn’t seem to follow what she was saying. Her head was spinning. She gazed vacantly at the brazier before them.

Huh?

The speaker came to some terrifying conclusion, sending a shiver through everyone else, but Maomao didn’t really hear what she was saying.

“Now, as for the thirteenth story...” Their hostess was just about to throw the final light into the brazier when Maomao stood up and opened the window.

“Hey, Maomao!” Yinghua tried to stop her, but Maomao wasn’t about to let her. The wind rushed into the room, blowing everyone’s coverings aside. Maomao took a deep breath of the fresh air and let it out again.

No wonder I was starting to feel dizzy, she thought. The extinguished lights had all been put in the brazier. The brazier had charcoal in it, and the remaining wicks had caught again. Put a bunch of half-consumed charcoal fuel in a cramped room and close the window, and of course only one thing could happen.

Maomao went over to some of the more alarmingly slumped ladies seated

around the brazier and brought them over to where the airflow was best. Yinghua, belatedly catching on, started to help.

Burning a flame in an airless space produces gases harmful to the human body. That was why she'd felt in more and more of a stupor as the night went on.

I was too slow noticing it, Maomao admonished herself, wondering why she hadn't picked up on it sooner. At the same time, she realized her actions had been rather rude to the host. She turned to the other palace woman to apologize, but didn't see her.

"...Bah, and I was so close too," she thought she heard someone say, but there was nobody there.

"So what was with that one story?" Shisui asked. The meeting had broken up with everyone drifting away. Yinghua was giving Maomao a look as if to ask *Who's this girl?* Shisui still had her cloth over her head, seemingly happy that way.

"What one story?" Maomao asked.

Shisui meant the story of the flame in the forest. She hadn't forgotten that Maomao had promised to tell her the story's secret.

"The prohibition on going into the woods might have been a superstition, but that doesn't necessarily mean there was no good reason behind it."

For example, suppose the forest was dangerous. Suppose it was full of food—but also full of things that couldn't and shouldn't be eaten. That could have inspired the ban. And what then? Suppose someone new came to the area, someone who hadn't grown up in the village. By then, "you mustn't eat what grows in the forest, for it will harm you" had, over many years, become simply "don't go into the woods." And precisely because people had observed the restriction so scrupulously, nobody knew how to distinguish what was and wasn't edible in the forest.

All of this suggested the following: wracked with hunger from the crop shortage, the mother and child tried to sustain themselves on the abundance of the forest. Knowing they were violating the village's customs, however, they did it secretly, when no one would see. They snuck into the forest in the brief moments of twilight, while there was still light but it was difficult to see anyone, and gathered mushrooms and berries. They returned home with the sunset—never knowing what they had harvested.

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“There’s a fungus called the moonlight mushroom,” Maomao said. It looked much like the ordinary oyster mushroom. “It looks quite edible, but in fact it’s poisonous and induces nausea when eaten. As its name suggests, it has one unusual characteristic.”

Namely, the mushroom glowed after dark. The fruiting body was indeed quite delicious—so delicious, in fact, that she hadn’t been able to help herself from chopping one up and eating a bit of it, whereupon her old man had forced her to vomit it back out, one of her most pleasant memories.

In any event, the mother and child had gathered the mushrooms before they glowed, so they never knew what they had as they walked along that dark path. The glowing of the mushrooms in their basket might have looked to some distant observer like the floating flames believed to be wandering human souls.

Meanwhile, when the woman and her child got home and lit a light, the fungus would cease to shine, looking perfectly normal as they emptied out their harvest and ate it. Moonlight mushrooms weren’t ordinarily poisonous enough to kill, but what if they were eaten by someone who was severely malnourished? The child would die first, followed by their mother.

Then there was the question of what the woman had tried to say at the end. Perhaps she’d tried to tell the other villagers “There are delicious mushrooms in the woods” or something of the sort. A little act of revenge toward the neighbors who had refused to help her or her child.

“So that’s what it was!” Shisui fluttered her cloth, looking satisfied. Then she said, “Okay, I’ve gotta go this way!” and then she went pattering off like a little girl. She struck Maomao as quite a free spirit, and not especially interested in what anyone else thought—not that Maomao was one to judge.

“Huh. So it’s not so scary after all,” Yinghua said. She was puffing out her modest chest bravely, very much the opposite of how she’d acted earlier. “I’ll bet the other stories have explanations like that too.”

“Maybe,” Maomao said. “I wonder.”

Together, she and Yinghua headed back to the Jade Pavilion.

“Oh, you’re back earlier than I expected,” said Hongniang, who was waiting for them. She was doing some stitching, making little adjustments for the fast-growing princess.

“Yeah, things got a little wild at the end,” Yinghua said.

“I suppose so,” Hongniang said, as if this made perfect sense. “After the lady who always hosted those gatherings died last year, I was a little worried about who would take her place.” Hongniang set down her needle, sighed softly, and rubbed her shoulders. “She was a thoughtful woman. I owed a lot to her kindness, myself. I’m sorry it was all over for her before she even got out of the rear palace.”

Maomao studied Yinghua’s expression: her earlier bravado was deserting her, her face turning pale.

“Er... About this lady...”

“This is strictly between us, but she was one of the former emperor’s bedmates. I don’t much like get-togethers like that, but it was one of her few amusements, and it would have been churlish to stop her. After she passed last year, I have to admit I felt sorry to think of the tradition simply disappearing. I’m glad someone stepped up to keep it going.”

Hongniang put her sewing tools away in a lacquered wooden box, and with another sigh she went to her bedroom. Maomao couldn’t help thinking that Hongniang’s story sounded familiar somehow—and then she realized that it resembled the tale the hostess had told. She couldn’t remember the exact details, but judging by Yinghua’s bloodless expression, she was thinking the same thing.

Hmm. Maomao crossed her arms and puzzled over it. The world was full of things she didn’t understand. In any event, she was glad the convocation had concluded before they had become the thirteenth story.

Yinghua, terrified, insisted Maomao stay with her that night, leaving Maomao too stifled to get much sleep.

Chapter 16: Beating the Heat

Maomao headed for the main room. They said she was wanted for something. When she got there, she found a eunuch draped across the couch. Maomao bowed politely, then went and stood before Consort Gyokuyou.

"Lady Gyokuyou, you asked for me?"

"Oh, it wasn't me," Gyokuyou said, taking a sip of some warm juice. She might normally have preferred some fruit wine with luxurious ice in it, but Maomao had advised her to abstain on account of her pregnancy. Hongniang was trying to make up the difference by fanning her.

"I'm the one with business for you," said Jinshi, his face as gorgeous as ever. Gaoshun was performing the same service for him as Hongniang was for Gyokuyou, fanning industriously. That would normally be a task for some more menial servant—the fact that none was present suggested there were secrets afoot yet again.

"What sort of business, sir?" Maomao asked.

Jinshi looked at Gyokuyou and said, "I'd like to have her back for a few days." He was clearly referring to Maomao. As for having her "back," she was technically on loan to Consort Gyokuyou, to look after the consort's health until the child was born. One wasn't normally allowed to return to the rear palace after having left it, but it seemed special dispensation had been granted—along with special conditions.

"Goodness. And what am I supposed to do for a food taster while she's gone?" Gyokuyou asked pointedly.

"You needn't worry about a thing. I'll lend you my lady-in-waiting in the meantime. She's quite experienced with poisons, if not quite so much as this young woman."

"I wonder, can I trust her?"

"You wound me, lady."

Gyokuyou had a mischievous smile on her face. When Jinshi referred to his lady-in-waiting, Maomao could think of only one person: the not-quite-elderly Suiren. Yes, she would certainly do well enough in Maomao's place.

She was a shrewd one, if nothing else.

But in that case, Maomao wondered, who would look after Jinshi? The grandmotherly attendant insisted on babying this otherwise adult man, such that Maomao wasn't even sure he could dress himself without her.

"You said a few days," Gyokuyou said. "Are you planning to go somewhere?"

"Indeed. I've been invited to go hunting."

"Goodness gracious!"

Hunting, huh? Maomao thought. What a very high-society way to pass the time. Would there be hawks involved to chase down the quarry?

"It's at Lord Shishou's invitation." Jinshi's smile was perfect; there wasn't so much as a crack in his facade.

Lord Shishou, huh? Maomao thought. She recalled he was an important official—Consort Loulan's father. Was it just Maomao, or did this smell like trouble? She wanted to tell Jinshi not to drag her into anything that was going to be a huge headache. But then again, she wondered if a hunt might mean she got to eat some fresh meat. Maybe they would be hunting deer or rabbit. *If I had the choice, I wouldn't want rabbit meat as much as I'd want a rice cake made by a rabbit.* An old fairy tale held that the rabbit in the moon produced medicine with a mallet.

"That sounds taxing. For both you and whoever accompanies you."

"There's a great deal at work here, you see."

"And you wish to borrow my Maomao for this?"

"Yes. Borrow her *back*."

Gyokuyou's eyes glinted the way they always did when she'd latched onto something that amused her. "Does it really have to be Maomao? We have plenty of perfectly nice girls here."

"No, I've told you I'd like her back, and that's all."

Maybe Maomao was just imagining the sparks that seemed to fly between Jinshi and Gyokuyou—or maybe not. In any event, Maomao took over fanning from Hongniang, who was getting tired.

"Hmmm," Gyokuyou said. "Well, now, I wonder which girl I should lend you."

"I've already told you which girl I want. All you need to do is give her back to me!"

Gyokuyou chortled merrily. "You keep calling her '*her*' and '*that girl*.'"

“Yes? What about it?” Jinshi said, a bit peeved.

“Say, Gaoshun. What is it you call Maomao, again?” Gyokuyou inquired of the reticent attendant, unabashedly enjoying herself.

“Me, ma’am? ‘Xiaomao.’” Despite his serious demeanor, he called Maomao by quite a sweet nickname, “Little Cat.” In fact, he was such a soft touch that she’d sometimes known him to stop by the medical office just to play with the kitten.

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Gyokuyou looked back to Jinshi, seeing that her prey was cornered. “So, tell me, what is it that *you* normally call Maomao?”

Jinshi didn’t say a word.

“Surely you don’t just say ‘Maomao.’ She won’t know if you mean her or the cat!”

Jinshi, looking less and less comfortable, glanced in Maomao’s direction.

Now that she mentions it, I don’t think he’s ever once called me by my name. She’d never noticed before. *Not that I really care.* Somehow, the extent of Jinshi’s discomfort struck her as strange. Hongniang jabbed her with an elbow, looking as if she wanted to say something, but Maomao didn’t know what.

It took another half hour of being needled by Gyokuyou before Jinshi got what he wanted, and by then Maomao’s arms were tired from fanning too.

To the north of the capital was an important grain-producing region. A great river rolled from west to east, and the landscape was dotted with towns and farming villages. Where the south cultivated wetland rice, the north grew wheat and *gaoliang*, a type of sorghum. Farther north there were forests, and beyond that, mountain ranges. North of the forest was the territory of Shihoku-shu, “the Shi Northern Province,” and there one began to leave the area of the country under the Emperor’s direct control.

The region centered around the capital was known as Ka-shu, “Ka Province,” and in addition, there were three other major provinces, along with a dozen or so smaller buffer territories among them. The name of the province gave an inkling of its role in things: of course the official *Shi*shou would come from *Shi*hoku-shu.

“Is this making sense?” Basen asked, interrupting his lecture, which he was delivering in a bit of a self-important tone. He was a young man with a perpetually furrowed brow perhaps a year or two older than Maomao.

How did the nation’s founding myth go, again? Maomao thought to herself. The country in which she lived was called Li. The name was only a single simple character, but it told a whole sprawling story of national creation.

At the top of the character were a few strokes representing a plant, while below that the character for “sword” was repeated three times. The plant represented “Ka,” a name that literally meant “blossom” and referred to the

Imperial ancestors—specifically, to Wang Mu, the mother of the Imperial line described in the old stories. The swords stood for men of martial valor; it was said that three warriors had accompanied Wang Mu, hence the three swords in the country's name.

Maomao seemed to recall that there had been many more annoyingly detailed stories to go along with this, but she'd been fighting back yawns the whole time she listened, so she didn't remember them very well. The only other thing she seemed to recall was that there was a difference in the sizes of the swords: two of the swords sat at the bottom of the character and the other stood above them; the one on top was larger, while the two below were smaller.

This also explained why the otherwise self-possessed Emperor could hardly look Shishou in the eye. The north, which is to say the topmost sword, was summoning high officials, proposing a long, relaxing hunt. True, the Emperor himself wasn't going, but plenty of perfectly important people were.

All of this was being explained to Maomao by the warrior sitting across from her. *Rattle, clatter*: they were in a carriage, and they were on the move.

A horse-drawn carriage traveling at a leisurely pace could cover about twelve kilometers in the space of an hour. Including rest periods and time to change horses, they'd been traveling for half a day already.

My butt's getting sore, Maomao thought. She was tempted to let her real feelings slip and propose they do something to remedy their situation, but at least she had a cushion to sit on. Everyone else was in the same boat, so complaining wouldn't get her anywhere. Instead she looked silently out the window. Her hair was done differently than usual, making her head feel heavy. Her shoulders slumped. If they were going to be on the road this long, surely they could have done her hair later.

Whether at Shishou's invitation or not, getting from the capital to Shihoku-shu was no easy matter. It was too far away for a day trip or even an overnight jaunt; Shishou himself kept a residence in the capital.

His family controlled the province of Shihoku-shu. They were one of the clans alluded to in the founding myth, and for that reason they had the weight of history behind them, but the rumors one heard about them were less than favorable.

After he'd finished his run-through of this information (which interested Maomao hardly at all), Basen crossed his arms and fell silent. The

subordinate officials with them looked tired, knowing that they were all going to be stuck in the same carriage together for the duration. They couldn't fall asleep, though, because despite his youth, Basen evidently held a rather high station, and they could hardly nap in front of their superior officer. Jinshi and Gaoshun at least were in another carriage.

A thread of drool was starting to dribble from Maomao's mouth, but that was just one of her charms. When Basen saw it, he clicked his tongue and said, "I don't know what my father sees in a girl like you..."

Father?

That would explain why he looked so familiar. He must be Gaoshun's son. At first she'd been surprised by the idea that a eunuch like Gaoshun might have a son, but when she thought about it, she realized that of course he hadn't been a eunuch from birth. Judging by his age, it shouldn't have seemed strange if he had a couple of kids.

In due course, a lake surrounded by buildings came into view outside the window. Basen relaxed his crossed arms at last, glad to have finally arrived, and his subordinates were clearly relieved. Maomao, rubbing her behind, absently watched the town approach. The colorful buildings stood against a backdrop of mountains. There were waterways too, and rows of large willow trees bending over flagstone paths. The buildings were reflected in the water as if in a mirror.

The former emperor had visited this area every year: the altitude was high, which kept it cool, and many used it as a place to beat the heat. In his final years he'd stopped coming, and the current Emperor hadn't been here since his accession either, but the place was well looked-after by the Shi clan, a job made easier because they lived in the lands they governed.

Maomao could see buildings even on the sides of the mountains, houses built like steps into the slope. They were arranged carefully, so as not to detract from the scenery.

The carriage stopped in front of one of the most splendid houses in the entire town, more than lavish enough to host visitors from the capital, who would be accustomed to every luxury. The three-story building with its eye-catching red pillars had roof tiles sculpted in the shapes of beasts; meanwhile, a moat ran around the mansion, filled with carp that looked like living damask. A black-lacquered fence bore dragons and tigers in places; the craftsman must have carefully soldered them on. It was distinct from the kind

of decoration one typically saw in the capital.

Maomao was studying it intently when she felt someone jab her in the side. She looked up to see Basen glaring at her; she obediently fell into step behind him.

As soon as they arrived at their rooms, Jinshi flounced onto the couch. His and Gaoshun's quarters were in the same building; on this occasion, it seemed Gaoshun was present as an invited guest. Maomao figured Basen was thus here as Jinshi's attendant. A rather stuffy-looking colored cloth lay on the table, and after a moment Maomao realized it was a hood.

I get it.

It truly was a crime to be too beautiful. To think, he had to go so far as to wear a disguise when making a journey such as this. It was understandable: a mere smile from this man might stop the heart of an unsuspecting townsgirl. A troublesome face, it must be said.

Judging by the layout of the house, the rooms they occupied were the finest available for receiving guests. From the furniture to the furnishings, everything was more than suited to even the most distinguished visitors. Still, Maomao couldn't help noticing how hot the room was with the window closed and candles lit. She was on the point of loosening her collar, but then realized that wouldn't be appropriate and that she was going to have to bear it. The makeup on her face, substantially thicker than normal, felt like it was going to peel off.

Jinshi, for his part, had opened his shirt, so Maomao took the liberty of looking at him like a squashed frog for the first time in quite a while. The fact that she, Gaoshun, and Basen were the only others in the room seemed to make Jinshi think this show of leisure was acceptable. Was it only the candlelight that made shadows appear to play across Jinshi's face? He looked more tired than usual.

"And here? What name shall I use?" Basen asked Gaoshun.

It was Jinshi, however, who answered. "Here in the room, my usual one is fine. Outside, Kousen."

"Understood, Master Kousen."

Maomao shot Gaoshun a puzzled look; Gaoshun stroked his chin and looked at Jinshi, while Jinshi narrowed his eyes and looked at Maomao.

"Is there some strange plan afoot?" Maomao inquired.

"Oh, it's—" Gaoshun began, but Jinshi held up a hand to stop him.

"I should be the one to explain. As for you, hold your peace."

"Of course, sir," Gaoshun replied, and almost physically withdrew from the conversation—and left Maomao perplexed.

"Am I right that Master Gaoshun and Master Jinshi are both present as guests on this occasion?" Maomao said. Normally, there was a somewhat more noticeable difference in station between them, but here they occupied the same building, even if they were in different rooms.

"For generations, the Ma clan has served Master *Kousen's* family," Basen said, a note of anger Maomao couldn't explain in his voice. His eyebrows were knitted together as if he were mentally working a puzzle, an expression that looked exactly like Gaoshun.

So he is *from good stock*, Maomao thought, finding herself impressed. She shook her head, provoking further consternation from Basen. He trotted over to Gaoshun and said, "Father, what is the meaning of this?"

Gaoshun looked troubled, then he looked at Jinshi before pulling Basen by the arm over to a corner of the room and holding a whispered conversation. Maomao could clearly see Basen's shock at whatever it was Gaoshun said. He then appeared to argue—but without another word, Gaoshun simply smacked him on the head.

Maomao wondered what they were doing over there, but she wasn't especially worried about it. She set about tidying up the luggage instead. If she didn't stick to the job, she'd get a piece of Suiren's mind later. Aged or not, that attendant could be fearsome indeed.

The hunt was to be held the next day; they would spend today at the mansion. An evening banquet was held in the garden, but Jinshi and the others showed no sign of leaving their rooms. They simply stayed in with the windows and doors shut tight, passing the time by reading books or playing Go. The chambers were warm and stuffy, but they requested ice to make things a little more bearable. It was brought to them from the icehouse by a rider going at full speed—in the middle of summer, truly the height of luxury. When Gaoshun spotted Maomao looking at the ice with utmost envy, he was kind enough to quietly slip a piece to her. What a really, truly thoughtful eunuch.

Personally, Maomao thought they could solve most of their problems just

by opening the windows. Finally, unable to help herself, she asked, “Why don’t we open the windows?”

She’d been asking Gaoshun, but it was Jinshi who answered. “Do the food tasting for our dinner,” he instructed her, looking frustrated. He added that then, she would understand.

Maomao was given a small sample plate of the dinner, and she tasted it just as she always did. There was a long pause.

“You see now?” Jinshi asked, eyeing the sumptuous food but still looking exasperated. The dinner, which had been loaded onto a cart, appeared to include only the finest ingredients.

“Indeed,” Maomao replied. “Softshell turtle.”

The softshell turtle was renowned for never letting go once it had clamped its mouth onto something. Its blood was considered an aphrodisiac, and the meat could be presumed to have the same property. When Maomao tried a sip of the pre-dinner wine, she noticed that although it had been given some smoothness with fruit juice, in fact the alcohol was pretty stiff.

It wasn’t just the appetizers and the aperitif: the ingredients in the side dishes, the entrée, and even the dessert all appeared calculated to make the eaters more *energetic*.

Gaoshun dug through their luggage and produced some portable rations. It looked like they were going to have a modest dinner despite the gorgeous food sitting in front of them.

“Aren’t you going to eat it? It’s not poisoned,” Maomao said.

“It may not be poisoned, but it’s still not fit to eat,” Jinshi replied. “In fact, I’m amazed you can keep such a straight face when you’ve eaten that stuff.” He and Gaoshun were both looking at her as if they couldn’t believe what they were seeing. In a corner of the room, Basen was boiling some water. And when it was already so hot!

“It tastes wonderful. It would be suspicious if there were any leftovers—so you don’t mind if I eat it, do you?”

“Fine. If that’s what you want.” Jinshi pursed his lips as he looked at the thoroughly satisfied Maomao. She, meanwhile, savored another sip of turtle soup.

Jinshi watched her closely. “How is it? Is it good?”

“It is. I don’t have particularly fond memories of softshell turtles, but this

I can live with."

"What do you mean, memories?" Jinshi asked. He picked up the tureen of soup, beginning to look interested.

"Oh, nothing important."

Maomao had been in the habit of helping her adoptive father ever since she was little. That included going to market to buy ingredients for medicines —and once, she'd run into an unsavory character on one of these trips. An exhibitionist who had undone his belt and opened the front of his robe. (Needless to say, he hadn't been wearing his skivvies.) He seemed to show up especially often in winter, and she always wondered if he didn't get cold.

Maomao, startled, had made to run away, and in the process she'd dropped the purchase she'd been holding.

"It happened to be a live softshell turtle, and—"

"Okay! Enough! I don't need to hear any more." Jinshi put down the tureen, a traumatized look in his eyes. Gaoshun and Basen, father and son, wore similar expressions. Apparently she'd slipped up again.

Gosh, the courtesans always love that story... It made her realize afresh, as she set aside the empty plate, that she didn't even speak the same language as those of better breeding. Still, what a waste of a good meal.

"There are plenty of good things here besides the turtle. You're really not going to eat any of it?" She urged the leftovers on them; it was far too much food for her to finish all by herself. There was no way that some dried meat (reconstituted with the hot water) and dried boiled rice would sate three grown men. There must have been a meal sent to Gaoshun's room as well; Maomao supposed he had refrained from eating it because it had the same sorts of ingredients.

"You're sure it's all right?" Jinshi ventured after a moment.

"Be my guest." *It would be such a waste to leave leftovers*, Maomao thought.

"You're absolutely sure?" he said, staring intently at her. She was puzzled as to why he was so insistent. But then Gaoshun intervened with a series of small shakes of his head. Jinshi nodded reluctantly. "I don't need it. Basen, you're free to eat it. In fact, I'm ordering you to."

"If that is your wish, Master Kousen." Basen sat down like an obedient servant, and Maomao passed him a cup of wine. He drained it slowly. "Delicious."

“I’m glad to hear that,” Jinshi said.

“However...”

“Yes?”

Basen went completely still, and a thin line of blood traced its way down from his nose. His face was bright red, and he appeared to be waging an internal struggle against something. Jinshi looked him in the face, and Basen shuddered. “How,” he asked, “is this girl still upright?”

He was looking at Maomao with a truly terrible expression, as if fighting back a force welling up from within his body. He was leaning forward as if to conceal a very specific part of himself. Ah, the trials of youth.

“No special reason,” Maomao demurred. The answer was simply that such was her constitution. Basen, still struggling, tried to wobble his way to the next room, but fell down in the process. “Are you quite all right?” Maomao asked.

“Just let him stay there. I’ll sleep in his room,” Jinshi said. The facing room was supposed to be for his servant. It was less spacious than his own chamber, but plenty large enough to sleep in.

“Master Jinshi, I can help carry him to his room,” Gaoshun said.

“I’m sure you’re both tired.”

“But, sir...”

If Jinshi said so, there was scant arguing; Gaoshun gave in and helped his son into the canopied bed. Maomao gave a helping hand where she was able. Thinking Basen looked awfully hot, she loosened his belt slightly, and his complexion improved. The blood from his nose got on the sheets, though, which was a shame.

Jinshi slept in Basen’s room, while Maomao used the room across from Gaoshun’s. Perhaps it was a bit of consideration on Gaoshun’s part that she had a room all to herself which would normally have housed several people. The bodyguards who’d come with them stayed with Gaoshun.

It was some luxury to have a room to herself, Maomao reflected. It even had a bath, so she was able to soak and relax. Simple pleasures.

Chapter 17: The Hunt (Part One)

The next day, Jinshi and the others rode off to the hunt. Jinshi wore his disguise (though he looked annoyed to have to do so), and continued to call himself Kousen, the name it appeared he was going to use for the duration. The disguise was understandable. Having someone who looked like Jinshi wandering around would be an absolute distraction all by itself. This wasn't the palace; nobody here knew he was a eunuch. With the incident at dinner fresh in her mind, however, Maomao couldn't help wondering what exactly the eunuch was hiding. She chose not to pursue the question. She could only imagine what would have happened had Jinshi mingled freely during mealtime. No wonder he kept the windows shut.

So it was that Maomao followed the hunters in a carriage. Indeed, the carriage contained several household servants, along with firewood, soup pots, and an array of other cooking implements. It seemed they intended to cook whatever they caught right on the spot.

The carriage rattled its way past the gaoliang fields for a good half an hour, and then the mountains came into view. After that they traveled on foot up the slopes for another hour, until they arrived at a house built on an elevation with an astonishing view. The green all around was refreshing, and water could be heard in the distance; it seemed they were near a large waterfall.

The servants, used to all this, set about preparing a fire. Several of them went with jugs to go fetch water. Maomao wondered if she should do something to help, but the entourages of the other officials with her weren't lifting a finger. They'd found a place under a canopy set up by some servants who had come early and were chatting together. The noble members of the party would eat in another location.

Probably safer not to do anything, Maomao thought. All too often, people did more harm than good when trying to help and only earned the enmity of those around them. The servants were probably just as happy to be left alone.

As she wandered, Maomao spotted a dog—one with a familiar keeper. *So*

the mutt's brought his mutt. It was Lihaku, who was something of a big, friendly dog himself. Wondering what he was doing there, Maomao went over and squatted beside him. He was busy rubbing the dog's belly, but when he realized someone had approached him, a suspicious look crossed his face.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello," Maomao replied.

"Hm? That voice... Oh!" He clapped his hands and nodded. "Young lady, it's you! What are you doing here? And looking so much lovelier than usual too!"

"So glad you finally noticed." Between the fact that she had no freckles and that she wasn't wearing her usual outfit, he seemed not to have realized it was her at first. He was a man who knew how to be rude, as ever.

"Yeah, but seriously, why are you here?"

"I was personally requested to attend."

"Huh, that's really something." One of Lihaku's good qualities was that he didn't think too hard about things. Maomao had spoken to him without really thinking about it herself, but maybe this wasn't the best time to be revealing who your acquaintances were. "You know, it was the same for me," Lihaku said. "Somebody asked for me by name to be part of the guard unit..." He sounded somewhat put out about this, though he continued to stroke the dog's belly. The animal wore a collar, and Maomao surmised from the breed that it was a hunting dog. Unfortunately for him, they would be hunting with hawks today; the dog would just have to cool his heels. That must have been why he and Lihaku were here holding down camp instead.

"'*You, you just keep an eye on the dog*,' they said." Evidently, though he'd been asked for by name, the other bodyguards—themselves proud men all—had effectively ostracized him. Lihaku had been making his way up in the world lately, but the higher you went, the more fierce the resistance became.

Lihaku pursed his lips—but not because he was upset. He was making some ridiculous *fssh fssh* sound, pushing the breath out of his mouth. He seemed to think he was whistling.

"You're very bad at that, sir."

"Yeah, thanks. Pipe down." He gave Maomao a smack on the head, then pulled at a string around his neck, producing a long, narrow tube that looked vaguely like a flute. Having given up on whistling, Lihaku put the cylinder to

his lips and blew on it in the dog's direction. The animal jumped up and looked right at him. With a series of long and short blows, he could make the dog sit and stand on command.

"He looks very smart."

"Sure is. When I need him, I can get him to come running from kilometers away." Then he gave three short bursts on the whistle, followed by four longer ones. The dog came over and sat in front of him, wagging his tail.

"He's so smart, but they want to use *that*." He looked at the sky. Maomao couldn't help following his gaze, and above them in the blue she saw a tiny black speck circling. Personally, she thought when hunting in the mountains, which were full of physical obstacles, it was probably wiser to use a dog than a hawk, but maybe hawks carried more prestige. Maomao wouldn't turn down some wild rabbit, though she dearly wished she might have some boar meat instead. But they weren't going to catch a boar with a bird.

Maomao contemplated what a good forest this was. A wide variety of trees grew here. And that likely meant a wide variety of fine medicinal herbs and mushrooms.

I guess they probably don't want me going in there, she thought. She was feeling fidgety. She glanced around: Lihaku was completely absorbed in playing with the dog. She didn't *think* anyone would notice her. But still... Still. She started looking around, and almost before she realized it, the sun had passed its zenith.

The air was full of the fragrance of sizzling meat. They were at the mountain retreat, where the wine flowed freely and women brought the cooked game around. About ten officials sat in chairs, and a table nearby held more side dishes. The room had been designed for good airflow, and buckets of water had been placed at their feet. There were servants with large fans present, and every effort had obviously been made to relieve the stultifying heat of a summer hunt. Shihoku-shu had a cooler climate, as befitted a place people went to beat the heat, but today the fine weather and the damp breeze conspired to make everything feel warm.

Servants solicitously came by with food. Additional meat had been cooked to supplement the catch from the hunt, which wouldn't have been enough for everybody. Anyway, unlike fish, game wasn't necessarily at its tastiest immediately after being caught.

Maomao stood behind Gaoshun, watching the proceedings with detachment. Gaoshun had a seat of his own; attendant girls and palace women stood at attention behind the various officials.

You know, now that I think about it... Outside of his master's room, Gaoshun didn't spend much time in Jinshi's company. Instead, Basen attended him, and Maomao naturally fell in with Gaoshun.

A strange-looking man occupied the seat of honor. His face was hidden behind a mask, and he hadn't so much as touched his food. Nor the wine either. Basen stood attentively behind him.

He has to wear that thing even here? Must be tough, Maomao thought. She didn't feel it particularly concerned her, though. The girls serving the alcohol kept stealing glances at the masked visitor—who was, of course, Jinshi. However odd his choice of accessories might have been, he was the most important guest here. Becoming the mistress of some high official would almost by definition bring more security than to end up married off in some mediocre match. And all the ladies here appeared shrewd enough to know it.

It wasn't just the women whose attention he commanded—the corpulent man sitting next to Jinshi was forever whispering to him. It was quite an intimate way of speaking—so maybe it was Maomao's imagination that made the tone of his voice sound faintly impertinent. Jinshi kept responding with quick little nods of his head.

So is that Shishou? Maomao wondered. She'd heard his name but didn't know his face very well, or at least didn't remember it. The location of his seat, though, was a strong indicator of his identity. *Wonder what they're talking about.*

Shishou stopped talking and leaned away from Jinshi. Jinshi's hand continued to tremble, and Basen's pallor had gone bad.

Something he said? She leaned over and whispered to Gaoshun. She was well familiar with Jinshi's ways. Think what she might about his personality, his outward appearance was unflappable. It was very strange to see him acting that way. She told Gaoshun that she thought there might be something wrong with him. Gaoshun, though, only shook his head and instructed her not to do anything.

Jinshi stood up, claiming he had a bit of "minor business" to take care of.

Basen was about to go to him, but he was delayed by some high officials around him.

Gaoshun tugged on Maomao's sleeve. "It's time to trade off," he said.

Maomao understood what he was getting at. She nodded, then called one of the other servants waiting outside the room. Then she followed Jinshi, who was walking unsteadily. He left the residence, taking care that no one should notice him, then headed toward the trees.

Maomao was going to have to follow him, but first there was something she needed. She picked up a long-necked bottle full of water. "May I take this?" she asked a servant who was preparing food.

"Sure, go ahead." The servant, obviously harried, answered without really looking at her. Maomao used a spoon to add a little something to the water. Then she took it with her toward the woods.

Shortly after entering the trees, she spotted a figure leaning against one of the trunks.

"Master J—"

She was about to say *Jinshi*, but clapped a hand over her mouth before the name could get out. She didn't know why, but he was using a pseudonym here. What was it, again? She tried to remember.

"It's you..." a strained voice said from behind the mask before she could call the name to mind.

"You need to take this off," she said, and made to pry the mask off his face, but Jinshi resisted fiercely.

"I can't."

"Of course you can. There's no one here." Wasn't that why he'd come all the way out here? There was nowhere to be alone in the residence. Jinshi had his own quarters, to be sure, but palace women were always there, perpetually ready to meet his every need.

"But someone might come."

Argh, this is so damn frustrating! Maomao leaned the wobbly man against her shoulder and began to pull him along. "If you're that worried about somebody seeing, then you just need to go somewhere nobody will."

Deeper into the woods they went. She could see a cliffside now, with a beautiful, massive waterfall. The spray was captivating; it looked like a white feather cloak such as one of the gods might wear. The fall cascaded down

several steps, forming a scene that must have been overwhelming even from above. Realizing this was where the water must have been gathered from, Maomao dipped her handkerchief in the river, then slipped it under Jinshi's mask, hoping to cool his face.

Then the ground around their feet exploded.

What?! There was a noisy flapping of wings as birds scattered. It was Jinshi who reacted: he grabbed Maomao in his arms and started running. But again the dirt at their feet spat into the air. The breeze carried a distinctive sulfurous smell.

"Could that be a *feifa*?!" Jinshi hissed, still moving unsteadily. He seemed strikingly calm in the face of what was obviously an unexpected development. The *feifa*: meaning "flying explosion," it was a weapon that utilized fire powder. It was sometimes used in hunting—but it would be very hard to claim that this particular incident was simply a mistake.

Jinshi thought for a beat, then tightened his grip on Maomao. "Sorry. This is going to get a little dramatic."

He started running with Maomao in his arms—then he leaped for the waterfall.

A little, my ass! Maomao thought as they plummeted into the spray.

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Chapter 18: The Hunt (Part Two)

The soldiers serving as bodyguards were clearly distressed. The officials were discussing something amongst themselves, with occasional exasperated glances at Basen. It had now been two full hours since his master had left his seat. Well beyond a reasonable amount of time to answer the call of nature.

Basen knew it was too late to regret his decision not to accompany Jinshi. Anyway, Jinshi had specifically told him to stay behind. Basen had seen his father give some sort of instructions to that maid who was always with them.

Basen grunted and furrowed his brow. Everyone told him he looked like his father when he did that. At this moment, though, his father—Gaoshun—remained expressionless, simply observing what was happening. Basen was directly involved, but today, Gaoshun was a bystander. He was just acting like the other officials. Basen was desperate to ask his father what he should do, but he couldn't approach him under the circumstances. Instead, he tried to imagine where his master might be even as he tried to ignore the distraction of the other officials' annoyance.

He'd already sent one of his subordinates out to search, but truth be told, he wished he could have gone personally. Sickened to be stuck in a role that seemed purely formal, all he could do was wait for his man to get back.

One of the servants claimed to have seen Jinshi leave the building, saying he was going to get some air. He'd told the guards not to follow him, but a petite lady-in-waiting had gone after him with some water. Basen knew who that must have been—and it only made him more certain that something had happened.

He shouldn't have just waited here.

At the moment, there were two distinctly different attitudes among those present: those who were worried about their missing master, and those who were openly amused that he had disappeared for so long with a serving girl. Basen was particularly furious at the idiots in this second group. He restrained himself from arguing openly with them—*That would never happen!* he wanted to exclaim—but the result was a compulsive tapping of

his foot against the floor.

The atmosphere at the banquet was quickly turning sour. Basen felt as if Shishou could have put things back on the right footing with just a word, but their host was too busy pouring wine into his portly, tanuki-like belly. Basen couldn't imagine what he was thinking. Shishou would never have gotten *where* he was without being *who* he was, but from that perspective, there was one man who might have been able to surpass him: the strategist, Lakan. Yet it was widely understood that Lakan had no such ambitions. The man people called eccentric, strange, bizarre—he'd recently bought out a courtesan, and he was shut up somewhere with her instead of attending this hunt. His absence wasn't particularly remarkable; what had the court chattering was the realization that the monocled eccentric had actual human feelings.

All this being said, Shishou was the host of this banquet, hardly in a position to carry out any plots personally. Basen dearly hoped that nothing untoward would happen while he was the one attending his master. If anything did occur, he suspected it would be instigated by someone other than Shishou, that their host wouldn't be involved.

It was then that a soldier, muscular and still young, ran up, his footfalls pounding on the floor. "Pardon me, sirs," he said as he entered the banquet hall and stood in front of Basen. It wasn't quite proper, but nobody stopped him. The soldier knelt before Basen, who bade him look up.

"What is it?" Basen asked.

In response, the soldier glanced around the room, then passed Basen a piece of cloth. He recognized the damp, shredded fabric immediately. He took in the soldier's expression. He was desperate to glance over at his father to see what he might be thinking, but he suppressed the urge, clutching the cloth tighter.

"Is that—"

An official reached out, but Basen hid the cloth from him. Not raising his eyes from the ground, he said, "A piece of my master's robe." Carefully expressionless, he looked at the soldier.

The young man was looking at the ground again as he said, "I found it hanging on a rock in the waterfall basin." That set the room buzzing. So the missing guest had torn his robe. "There was no one in the area," the soldier continued. "The river is rapid there, however, and swollen by the recent rains."

The people who had been snickering over the visitor's assignation with one of the ladies went pale. "Send out a search party immediately!" someone shouted, but it was a little late for that. Guests began to pour out of the banquet hall until only a handful of people were left, including Basen, the soldier who had brought the report, and Shishou.

The soldier glanced in the direction of those who had left, then stood. "If I may, sir, I'm going to go back where I found that and have another look around," he said, and then he left as well.

Basen pretended not to have noticed that when the soldier looked up, he grinned.

Basen left the residence, instructing two of his subordinates to stay behind at the banquet hall. Those who had shared Basen's concern for his master had already sent their men to search the first time Basen had asked, so that now it was only the scoffers who were stumbling over themselves to look useful.

Basen heard some of the other guests shout to him, and he answered them offhandedly, but what he was really doing was looking around. He found the soldier who had reported to him; he was now accompanied by a dog that sniffed around, searching for something. It looked like a hunting animal tracking game, but then one of the officials passed in front of it and it began howling.

"Wh-What the hell?!" the man exclaimed, cringing to find himself the object of all this noise.

"Ah, I'm very sorry, sir," the dog's handler said.

"Just get him away from me!" the man demanded. The soldier managed to pull the dog back, but now the animal started barking at the official's subordinate. The man and his underling moved off, clearly thinking what an ill-trained hunting animal they were dealing with.

After another thirty minutes or so of searching, someone shouted from the direction of the waterfall. A bevy of guests were gathered downstream of the basin. There was a torn robe there, with dark-red stipples—and a broken arrow stuck through it.

"*What* is going on here?" Basen said, but the discoverers of the robe shook their heads. The tear in the outfit perfectly matched the piece of cloth that had been found earlier. Water had caused the red stains to fade, but they were unmistakably blood, and they clearly traced back to where the arrow

had struck.

The owner of the robe was nowhere to be seen. If the robe had been carried to them by the current, then he must be upstream—but if the arrow had caught the outfit and the owner had wriggled out of it, then he might be downstream. There were no wet marks on the banks of the river, though, making it unlikely he'd climbed out here.

Basen looked at the torn piece of cloth and frowned. "Show me the arrow." One of his men passed him the broken projectile. He inspected the tail feathers and the head. Then he turned toward the still-growing crowd of officials and announced, "I apologize, but we're going to have to search everyone's belongings."

The arrow had been fletched with hawk feathers. Those were expensive, limiting the number of people who might have used them. However, many of the guests on this expedition, knowing that hawks were to be used in the hunting, had superstitiously brought supplies decorated with hawk feathers. What was more, each of the items had been painstakingly handcrafted by professional craftsmen. The highborn hated to see a design repeated; even when it came to consumables like arrows, they preferred to be unique. Each of them could be expected to carry arrows of exceptional construction and materials.

Though obviously displeased to find themselves objects of suspicion, the guests reluctantly complied, each producing the hunting implements from his carriage, appearing confident that no such arrow was to be found among his belongings.

"Can you explain this to me?" Basen asked icily.

"Just what is that?" responded the distressed owner of the arrow Basen was holding. His name was Lo-en, a high official of the board that handled finance. But his title or station mattered little. At the moment, his abundant beard was trembling as he denied any knowledge of the arrow. "I don't own anything like this—there must be some mistake!" he said, with much shivering and gesticulating.

The onlookers started murmuring. Suspicious glances began to turn on Lo-en. Despite what the man said, the broken arrow in Basen's hand perfectly matched the ones in Lo-en's baggage.

"Please, explain how it's a mistake," Basen said.

“Somebody must have planted those there to frame me!” Lo-en’s face was drawn with panic, and his servants shared his distress. They were all obviously deeply shaken by this utterly unexpected turn of events. Lo-en’s defense started the crowd talking again. It was true, they seemed to agree, that only an inordinately clumsy criminal would keep a quiver full of the arrows used in a crime.

The soldier with the dog stood behind Basen, watching the scene as if he wanted to comment. Basen studied the shred of cloth again. “Then perhaps the arrows that were switched out were thrown away somewhere nearby.” His gaze took in the residence and all the scenery around it. “We’ve searched the riverbanks fairly thoroughly, so perhaps it’s time to start looking in the woods.”

Somebody flinched at that. It was the slightest of movements, but someone who was watching carefully would have seen it. But would this person take the bait?

“Shall we split up and search, then?” Basen asked. “I don’t need everyone here. If about half of you could help me look for my master, that would be enough.”

No one dared object to this proposal. Lo-en and his party, meanwhile, were still recovering their wits. Basen let out a sigh and looked at the soldier behind him. The man gave him a friendly smile.

This would do it, Basen thought. He looked at the torn robe, openly annoyed. The fabric bore familiar handwriting.

○●○

The man looked around, panicked, wondering if anyone would show up. He was sure they couldn’t possibly find it, but having everyone looking for you was an unsettling feeling nonetheless.

They would never find it, he was sure—but the thought naturally led him to edge toward it. He was in the woods, with its piles of fallen leaves and soft soil. The leaves were neatly scattered, so it wouldn’t be noticeable at a glance. If that bunch of determined men started rooting through the leaves and digging in the ground, though, that might be a problem.

What to do?

The man was flustered. Why had *that* been *there*? The question hounded

him. Maybe that was what made him more panicky than usual.

When he arrived at his destination, he breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing had changed. The ground was undisturbed, just as he'd left it.

"Is there something there, sir?"

The man flinched at a voice from behind him. He turned to see a young woman with sopping hair, holding a mud-stained, cloth-wrapped package. His eyes went wide. "Hey! That's—"

The man reached out, but a large hand grabbed his wrist. He looked and saw the owner of the hand: a beefy soldier, the one with the hunting dog.

For the second time that evening, the dog howled at the man.

"Guess dogs don't like you much," the young woman said, asserting her grip on the package, her gaze cold. "I'm betting *this* is why you didn't want to hunt with them."

From within the bundle, she produced a *feifa* gun.

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Chapter 19: The Hunt (Part Three)

Let's go back a bit, to the moments immediately after Jinshi and Maomao jumped into the waterfall.

She felt firm pressure, first against her mouth, then her chest. "Hrk," Maomao groaned, then coughed up water. She sat up, allowing herself to vomit out whatever would come up along with the remaining contents of her stomach. She felt someone gently rubbing her soaked back.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you couldn't swim."

"No one could...swim...in that," Maomao managed in spite of her bloodless face and lips. Entirely without warning, Jinshi had grabbed her in his arms and flung them both off a cliff. He'd had a proper running start and had kicked hard off the ground; somewhere in the middle of it, Maomao had thought she heard another blast of the *feifa*.

The cliffside had been nearly fifty meters high. Under any other circumstances, she could only have assumed Jinshi had lost his mind.

"The basin here is deep," he said now. "So long as you manage to land in it, you should survive, assuming you don't drown."

"Big assumption," Maomao replied. When he saw how angry she was, Jinshi found he couldn't quite look at her.

Maomao stood and loosened her sash. Her robe was soaked through and very heavy.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

"I'm sorry I'm not pretty enough for you, but I'll catch a cold at this rate. And so will you. Take off your clothes, Master Jinshi. I'll wring them out." Then Maomao began to do just that. Her robe was still heavy. Deciding she didn't care that much, Maomao proceeded to pull off her skirt and even her underrobe. There was a thump as bundles of medicinal herbs hit the ground. They were soaked—ruined, she thought, sighing. She decided to refrain from removing the simple clothes that covered her front and her hips, at least. There might not be much to hide on her body, but she wanted to hide what

there was.

She picked up Jinshi's robe, tossed it on the ground with a thump of its own, and began squeezing the water out.

"You can worry about mine later," he said. "Take care of yours first." He sounded oddly annoyed. Knowing she couldn't let him stay that way, however, she continued wringing out his robe. He practically snatched it back from her and began squeezing it dry himself. She figured that was just as well; he was stronger than she was and would do it more efficiently. She went back to working on her own clothes.

She put her skirt and underrobe, still rather damp, back on, then finally took a look around. They were in a dim cavern. "Where are we?"

"Behind the waterfall. Not many people know about this place."

"But you do."

"An official who used to play with me here long ago taught me about it. I gather that going in here is sometimes used as a sort of test of courage."

"I see..." Maomao sifted through the inundated herbs, trying to decide if there was anything that could still be used, when she came upon some small bundles wrapped in bamboo-shoot-skin coverings. She held them out to Jinshi. He undid the monkeygrass that tied the bundles shut to reveal boiled butterbur. They'd been packed in layers, and the ones at the center were relatively undamaged.

"I'm sorry it's such poor fare, but I must ask that you eat this," Maomao said. The plant was seasoned to give it some flavor, and a bit of a soaking probably wouldn't hurt the taste that much, but nonetheless, it wasn't the sort of thing one would normally put on a noble's dinner table.

"What is it? Some kind of medicine?"

"No, sir. You appear to lack salt."

The butterbur wasn't intended as a medicament; Maomao had brought it along as a snack to munch on in her spare time. The flavoring had appeared at breakfast that morning and Maomao had liked it, so she'd asked one of the maids to pack some for her.

"Salt?" Jinshi asked, looking at Maomao. His mood seemed to have improved, but she couldn't forget how he'd been stumbling earlier. During their leap, she'd dropped the bottle she'd brought to give to him—she'd filled it with a mixture of water, soy paste, and sugar.

"When you wear a disguise like that on a day as warm as this, of course

you'll start to overheat. I'll bet you were feeling lethargic and had a headache."

It was clear why Jinshi hadn't been feeling well. He'd gone around with his face covered, not only failing to eat properly but hardly even getting any water. Even a lack of water alone, though it seemed such a simple thing, could lead to death in some cases. Dunking themselves in the basin had taken the edge off the overheating, but she wanted him to get some salt for good measure. Hence the butterbur.

"So that's what you're thinking." Jinshi took some of the plant and put it in his mouth. Then he promptly took another bite—the salty flavor must have been better than he'd expected.

At that moment, a rather embarrassing sound echoed through the cavern: it came from Maomao's stomach. It wasn't her fault—Maomao didn't eat much, but that meant she got hungry all the sooner. And the servants didn't eat until after the guests had dined.

Jinshi put a hand to his mouth, holding out some of his butterbur to Maomao. She was suddenly seized by the desire to glare at him, to bare her teeth and scowl. She managed to quash the impulse, of course.

"Thank you," she said, although she worked in a bit of a pout as she said it—and then she plucked a bit of butterbur for herself and put it in her mouth. Defeated, Jinshi ate his helping as well. When they were left with only the wrapping, Jinshi licked the last of the salt off his fingers. Maomao was struck by how childlike it was, but anyway, she went ahead and cleaned up the bamboo wrapper.

"What in the world was that earlier?" she asked, deeply uneasy.

"That was a *feifa*—a handheld firearm. The shots came fairly close together, so there's a good chance we were attacked by multiple assailants."

The *feifa* was designed for battle, but using it required packing it with powder and ammunition, then setting fire to it. That presumably explained Jinshi's choice to jump off the cliff rather than to try to hide in the forest. In the woods, he would have been running straight into his enemies' clutches. All the worse when they didn't know how many enemies there were.

What's he done to get himself so hated?

Maomao wanted to berate him for dragging her into this, but if she was honest with herself, she could hardly complain: she was the one who'd followed him out to where they made convenient targets. The moment they'd

entered the woods they'd made themselves vulnerable, but getting out of sight of the mountain residence had been the final nail in their coffin.

Notwithstanding her misgivings, Maomao looked around at where they were. The roar of the waterfall filled the cavern, which was damp and full of moss. She could see the skeletons of small animals here and there, suggesting that they'd gotten in but hadn't managed to get back out. The cavern was darker farther in, but she could feel a breath of wind.

"So you knew about this cavern. Do you know if there's a way to get out?" she asked.

"Normally, one would simply swim out past the waterfall."

"Might be tricky for me." Maomao was not a gifted swimmer. Witness how she had nearly drowned earlier.

"There's a hole in the ceiling up ahead," Jinshi replied. "It's connected to a cave closer to the residence." Those who had entered this cavern as a test of courage had been, it seemed, often extricated via that route.

"Does Master Gaoshun know about this place?"

Jinshi couldn't quite look at her. "He hated for me to play games like this." So they'd been doing it in secret from him. The air between Maomao and Jinshi suddenly seemed to grow more tense. "Basen knows about it, but I'm not sure if he'll connect the dots immediately." Unlike Gaoshun, Basen wasn't always the quickest thinker. If only there were some way to let him know where they were.

Whoever had shot at Jinshi was probably searching the area around the waterfall now. And in Jinshi's current physical state, there were no guarantees he would be able to swim safely away, anyway.

Maomao turned toward the interior of the cave. She could hear the wind whistling through the ceiling. It occurred to her that they might be able to shout for help, but Jinshi shook his head. "They would have to be awfully close by to hear us. We'd be lucky if somebody noticed if we shouted all day."

Maomao cocked her head as a memory floated to mind. She put her thumb and forefinger into her mouth and tried to whistle. But she hadn't done it for a long time, and she didn't get much of a sound. *Should've known it wouldn't be that easy.*

Admitting defeat, she went over and looked up at the hole in the ceiling. It wasn't that far up, maybe 270 centimeters. Jinshi had to be at least 180, but

he probably wouldn't be able to jump up to the hole.

Jinshi watched her, seeming to know what she was thinking. He didn't say it, but she assumed he was trying to judge how heavy she was.

Maomao preempted him: "I can't." He had probably been picturing her perched on his shoulders, and concluding that she might be able to reach the opening. Being who and what she was, however, Maomao simply couldn't agree to such a plan. If Suiren ever found out Maomao had put her feet on Jinshi, regardless of the exigencies of the situation, Maomao didn't want to think what might happen to her.

"What's the alternative? You underneath? I would crush you."

"But—"

"Do it."

When he put it that way, she didn't have much choice. Maomao went over to where Jinshi was crouching down, although she made a point to look annoyed about it. He was ready for her to get on his shoulders—and, left with no other options, she did so. She held on to his damp head as lightly as possible as he stood up.

"You could stand to put a little weight on, you know."

"Surely this isn't the time, sir."

She couldn't see the opening in the gloom, but was able to find it by feel. It was damp, and slippery in places. Somehow she managed to get a grip by the tips of her fingers, then pulled herself up so her feet were on Jinshi's shoulders.

"Seems promising," he said.

"Yeah..." Maomao replied. Just as she was preparing to stand up, though, a moist-eyed creature landed square on her head. "*Ribbit!*" it croaked, and then jumped away again.

A frog, Maomao thought. It was hardly enough to scare her, but it was plenty to break her concentration. Her fingers, which had barely been holding her up, slipped away.

"Oh—" Maomao lost her balance, still only halfway to her feet. The motion caught up Jinshi below her.

"H-Hey, watch out!" he exclaimed, wobbling. He could have simply let go, but he had the decency to try to hold on to Maomao. Unfortunately, the result was that he slipped on the damp moss and took a tremendous fall.

He didn't say anything immediately. Maomao, meanwhile, felt no pain,

but did find damp skin pressed against her cheek. It was noticeably warm, and she could feel a pulse in it.

She also couldn't move. Two large arms were wrapped around her, holding her close. Vestiges of fragrant perfume reached her nose.

Maomao felt her own heart rate increase. She worried that with their bodies so close, Jinshi would hear it, but she couldn't pull away even though she wanted to. As the blood pounded through her veins, Maomao found herself focused on just one thing.

What is that*?*

Maomao's left hand was caught between them, and something squishy lay against her palm. At first she thought it was the frog, crushed by the fall, but the size was nothing like that of the amphibian that had jumped on her head. What's more, whatever it was seemed to be covered in cloth. Had the frog jumped into Jinshi's robe? Without really thinking about what she was doing, Maomao groped about with her fingers, trying to figure it out.

"Hngh?!" Jinshi grunted. His heart rate shot up. Maomao looked up to find herself staring at Jinshi's chin—she could see him biting his lip, hard. He seemed to be struggling, fighting with something.

The frog in his robe shifted as if it were alive.

"I'm—I'm sorry, but...could you move your hand? It's m-making things rather difficult..." Jinshi sounded like he could barely get the words out, and he refused to look at her. She even saw that for some reason, cold sweat was trickling down his face. His brow was firmly knitted, almost as if he were in great pain.

"Difficult?" Maomao reflexively squeezed her hand, and Jinshi's expression grew dramatically more intense. Only then did it occur to Maomao to look at where her hand actually was. It rested somewhere below Jinshi's belly button.

She didn't say anything. Something was there—something that should never have been there. Something that would be hugely embarrassing to have grabbed, yet which she shouldn't have been able to grab because it shouldn't have been there—it categorically *couldn't* have been there. Jinshi was a eunuch, an official of the rear palace.

But, well, what was there...was there.

Huh?!

Slowly Maomao moved her hand away and was about to try to extricate

herself from Jinshi's slackened grip, but he pressed on the small of her back, keeping her where she was, straddling him.

Jinshi brushed his bangs aside and let out a breath, then looked at Maomao. "I suppose in a sense, this saves me some trouble." His face was that of a celestial nymph whose heart was beset by gloom. But he was no nymph. He had a countenance that could have brought the country to its knees with a single smile, yet he was no woman.

And neither, it turned out, was he a eunuch bereft of the foremost symbol of manhood.

Jinshi's robe had come open when Maomao had landed on him, but the body it revealed was not soft and indulged; instead it was all taut muscle, the product of discipline and training. His face might be that of a nymph, but his body was that of a warrior.

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Now it seemed inexplicable to Maomao that it had never occurred to her before that he might *not* be a eunuch. Perhaps she'd subconsciously avoided entertaining the possibility.

"There's something I want to tell you," Jinshi said. "It's one reason I had you come along on this trip."

Maomao found herself wanting to plug her ears. She understood instantly that she mustn't hear any more. But plugging her ears would only make it obvious what she was thinking.

There was a man in the rear palace who wasn't a eunuch. What would happen if that fact got out? What if that man had ever laid a hand on any of the consorts; if seed that wasn't the Emperor's had been sown in his garden?

Maomao scowled at Jinshi. *Stop, please! Don't drag me into this...*

Jinshi had frequently put Maomao to use before, and although sometimes more and sometimes less, it was always a headache for her. Even so, it had never seemed worth her while to get truly upset. But this was different. Once she had this knowledge, she would have to take it to her grave.

And I'm not ready to follow you to my grave!

Thus, instead, Maomao said, "I'm very sorry, sir. I'm afraid I might have crushed a frog." She kept her face completely expressionless.

"...A frog." Jinshi winced. Fine. Let him wince. Maomao would overcome this situation by sheer force of will.

"Yes, sir, a frog. I apologize again—it dropped on me from above and made me lose my balance. You aren't hurt, aren't you?"

That squishy-feeling thing had been a frog, she kept telling herself, just a frog.

"That was no f—"

"I'm terribly sorry, I know you took the brunt of the fall for me. Let's get out of here, quickly." She tried to stand up, but Jinshi wouldn't let go of her. "Master Jinshi, would you move your hands?"

"Who are you calling a frog?" Jinshi sat up, still holding her in place, so that they ended up facing each other with Maomao almost on his knees. What with his legs spread and her veritably on top of him, the situation could hardly have looked more compromising. As Jinshi leaaaaned closer to her, Maomao almost flinched away, but she was not going to be beaten now. She stared him down, their noses inches apart.

"If it wasn't a frog, what was it?" she asked.

It was just a frog, it was just a frog, she kept repeating, like a mantra. The squishy thing under her left hand had been a frog. A frog, and nothing more. Frogs were gross—she wiped her hand on her skirt.

"Surely a frog would have been smaller, wouldn't it?" Jinshi asked, getting his face another inch closer to hers.

"No, sir, there are some decently sized amphibians around this time of year..."

"D-Decent..."

Jinshi flinched again, looking shocked, and Maomao seized the moment to close the distance further, until their noses were practically touching. "Yes, decent. And if it wasn't a decently sized frog, what decently sized thing could it have been?"

Decently sized didn't cover it, but that would do for now. Yes, "decently sized" would be enough.

"Hey, are you wiping your hand?"

Why did Jinshi seem so scandalized? "Because frogs are gross, sir."

"Gross! This from the person who drinks snake wine!"

"But frogs are slimy."

"Who's *slimy*?!"

They glared at each other for long seconds, then almost a minute.

Jinshi blinked first, so to speak, looking away from Maomao with his lips still pursed.

D...Did I win? Maomao asked herself with a sigh of relief.

No good ever came of knowing too much. And for Maomao, whose birth made her suited for little more than drudge work, it was best not to know anything at all. Then whatever happened, whatever her superiors might do, Maomao could say truthfully that she hadn't known anything about it. That had been her position thus far, and she had no intention of changing it now. Jinshi and Maomao were an official and his servant; nothing more, nothing less—and she need know no secrets to fulfill her duties.

Jinshi's grip finally relaxed, and Maomao slithered out and tried to stand up—only to find herself pushed to the ground. She hadn't been expecting it, and she collapsed, falling on her back. She looked down, and there was Jinshi. He shifted, crawling on top of her. A faint light, like a candle flame, danced in his eyes. "Very well." He slowly set his hands behind her knees and lifted them up, putting the two of them in an even more compromising

position than before. “Want to find out for yourself?” Jinshi was scowling.

Maomao got goosebumps all over and started sweating profusely. She realized belatedly that she’d pushed Jinshi too far.

Jinshi, for his part, looked lost for a beat. Seconds, then a minute, passed, and neither of them moved. At length, Jinshi seemed to make a decision. He bit his lip and leaned forward, his face slowly coming closer to hers.

I wonder if I should give him a good kick, Maomao thought, her mind whirling, but then Jinshi stopped and looked up in annoyance. “What’s that?”

Maomao thought she heard a noise from the exit. What sounded like the howling of an animal could be heard from above them.

Slowly, uncertainly, Maomao put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. She was answered by the barking of a dog. She whistled again, and then a ball of fur came plunging through the hole above them, landing square on Jinshi’s back. While he rubbed his waist, Maomao scrambled out from under him. The furball was the hunting dog Lihaku had been playing with. Maomao gave it a big hug and a nice pat.

“Hey, what are you doing? Don’t go running off like that!” came the voice of the other big dog. He didn’t sound terribly worried, really.

Still rubbing his back, Jinshi looked up at the ceiling. Maomao, feeling like she’d escaped by the skin of her teeth, shouted Lihaku’s name as loud as she could.

“How in the world did you get down there?” Lihaku asked, looking flummoxed. He’d fetched a rope and pulled Maomao and Jinshi out of the cavern. As Jinshi had said, the hole in the ceiling let out close to the residence.

“And what are *you* doing with...someone so important?” he added, in a whisper to Maomao. “Someone so important” seemed to refer to Jinshi, who was now wearing his disguise. Presumably it would have been safe for Lihaku to see him, but then, perhaps one couldn’t be too careful.

“Let’s just say it’s hard to explain,” she said. Lihaku cocked his head at that, but with someone of Jinshi’s status involved, he knew it was best not to ask too many questions. They’d told him only that they’d fallen into the waterfall basin and ended up in the cave.

“I must ask you not to tell anyone that I’m here,” Jinshi said. He was seated on the floor of the upper cavern. He sounded like a different person

from usual; maybe it was just that hard to speak with the mask on.

"As you wish, sir." Lihaku bowed his head respectfully.

Maybe Jinshi wanted to see what the others would do next if they didn't realize he'd been found. Maomao was surprised, though, that he wasn't going to let Basen or even Gaoshun know.

The dog was lying in Lihaku's lap, wagging its tail; he was patting its head and giving it pieces of dried meat. Maomao glanced at the animal. It had managed to follow her whistling, so it obviously had pretty good ears.

"Does he know any other tricks?" she asked.

"Tricks? He can find a rabbit warren, I guess. That's about it." It was like she and Lihaku were having a perfectly normal conversation. The dog came over and sniffed her. There was an intelligence behind the goofy demeanor.

Maomao stole a glance at Jinshi. With what had just happened, she almost couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye. But what had to be said had to be said. "Master J— Kousen," she began, remembering just in time to use his assumed name. Since he was wearing the mask, he probably wanted to go by his pseudonym.

"Yes? What is it?" The voice that came from behind the mask was cold. He must have been angry at Maomao for getting him so worked up earlier. Why else would he be acting like this? And would it be unfair of Maomao to claim that she'd never seen it coming? It wasn't exactly as if he'd tried to deceive her. He might even have been trying to explain himself. But Maomao, flooded with a desire not to know anything, had come up with an outrageous cover. She could hardly blame him for being upset about that particular story. He had such confidence in his appearance, after all. And such a fine frog, no doubt.

Maomao was at a loss for the right thing to do, but if nothing else, she had to start by saying this: "I think I may be able to pinpoint who shot at us earlier." She gave the hunting dog a pat on the head.

And that brings us back to the present.

Maomao opened the dirty bundle. Inside were three *feifa* still redolent of fire powder. She had never seen a *feifa* before and was surprised by how small they were. Jinshi and Lihaku had looked almost as startled as she had. They were supposedly the newest model, imported from abroad, not yet common in this country. They didn't use a fuse to light the fire powder like

earlier models, but rather relied on a sophisticated construction that used a specially shaped metal part to create a spark to ignite the powder. Neither Jinshi nor Lihaku had ever seen these most up-to-date *feifa*; they'd simply fired them once and their understanding of how the weapons worked went no further than that.

These newest *feifa* had a unique odor, akin to rotten eggs—not pleasant by any means. The fire powder was typically made by combining charcoal with saltpeter and sulfur, so that when it exploded it had a very unique smell, a powerful aroma that made you want to cover your nose. If such a device had been used during the hunt, any dogs, with their excellent noses, would have reacted immediately. And indeed, when presented with the smell, Lihaku's hound had led them directly to these *feifa*.

Hunts were not conducted with *feifa* in this area. For one thing, the guns weren't accurate enough, and they weren't suited to the mountain environment, with all the objects that could get in the way of a shot. The reason they'd been used in the attempt on Jinshi's life probably had much to do with the fact that these were the newest model. The unique way of generating a spark increased their accuracy and range, as their test firing demonstrated. And yet even so, this man who had shot at Jinshi had missed.

Lihaku, just that good at his job, had the man's arms pinned behind his back and had put a gag in his mouth to prevent him from swallowing his tongue.

"I do feel a bit bad for making everyone suspicious of those old guys," Lihaku said. Any trap required bait. At Jinshi's instruction, they'd chosen an official whose reaction was likely to be easy to read.

The captive man's coconspirators—which is to say the officials above him and the lackeys below him—were already being staked out so that they could be arrested at will. Now all that was necessary was to march this man away and get his confession.

The hunting dog was running in circles around Lihaku. "That's right, you're a good boy," Lihaku said, holding on to the captive with one hand and patting the dog with the other. They already had a pretty good idea of who the culprit was. Anyone who had fired a *feifa* would reek of it, and even if they thought they'd gotten rid of the smell, they couldn't fool a tracking dog.

Maomao wrapped the weapons back up and followed Lihaku as he pushed the captive along.

Epilogue

She still didn't feel good about it. As with the case of Suirei, Maomao hated to leave things unresolved. But she knew that losing her head wouldn't serve any purpose.

Gaoshun was attending the evening's banquet, which was being held on a boat out on the lake. That meant a minimum of bodyguards, and Maomao stayed home. She was in her room, enjoying the night breeze.

Those feifa*,* she thought. They'd looked unusual. Someone had said they were the newest model. One could surmise they came from the west.

The west...

Maomao thought about the envoys who had come angling to make themselves the Emperor's bride. What *had* they been doing when they went sneaking out of their rooms? Gaoshun had asked about women who carried secrets instead of children, but one might also carry out a plot. Maomao had thought that perhaps the women had been seducing court officials to turn them into coconspirators, but there was another possibility.

Every country desired the newest weaponry, but if one nation were to sell it openly to another, war could be the only result. The envoys' country thus couldn't sell arms openly. Yet neither could they sell them secretly, without going through the court...could they?

Perhaps the bridge we're crossing is even more dangerous than I realized, Maomao thought.

Then again, perhaps they had an even bigger and more powerful backer.

There was no telling how much the men who had been arrested today would say, or even how much they knew. Maomao just hoped that whatever was going on would be nipped in the bud. She wasn't soft enough to wish for the joy and happiness of other people, but if things around her were peaceful, it meant she, too, could live in peace.

She was just closing the curtain, thinking she might get some sleep, when there was a knock at the door. She jumped a little in spite of herself. Then she crept over and opened the door ever so slightly. She found herself confronted

with the one person she least wanted to see at that moment.

Gaoshun was at the banquet, and Basen was probably with him. Why was *this* man the only one not attending?

"You don't have to let me in if you don't want to." The lovely voice sounded subdued. Through the crack in the door, Maomao could see Jinshi turn and lean against the wall. "I'm sorry for upsetting you."

Maomao didn't say anything, but she leaned against the wall on her side, mirroring Jinshi. From the hallway she heard him sigh. Then came the sound of him scratching his head, scuffing his feet across the floor in frustration, and finally the sound of his hair hitting against the wall. (Was he shaking his head?) She didn't have to be able to see him to know exactly how he must look at that moment. He wanted to say something to her, but he couldn't find the words. Maomao felt the same way.

She scratched the tip of her nose, a little annoyed. "I haven't given it a second thought. In fact, I should apologize to you." She'd been so insistent about "decently sized," after all. Anyone would lash out. Even Jinshi. Even at Maomao.

On the other side of the wall, Jinshi grunted.

I wonder what he's thinking. Maomao was borderline oblivious to people's feelings, partly because she had never been that interested in them and partly because of the way she'd been raised. The inhabitants of the Verdigris House had taken good care of her when she was a baby, but work always came first, and she'd often been left by herself. She could cry, but no one would come to help her until they were done with their job. She was told she eventually ceased crying much at all—maybe she'd learned the lesson.

Perhaps that was behind it all, and perhaps not; Maomao didn't know. But whatever the reason, she'd grown up not very sensitive to when people felt affection or, for that matter, hatred for her. It was what had allowed her to weather the storm in the Crystal Pavilion. She didn't enjoy it, of course, but it bothered her much less than it did most people.

It also left her uncertain what to say to Jinshi—so she didn't say anything. She was thinking as hard as she could, searching for the words. Finally she said, "There's nothing to say. As far as I'm concerned, you are who you are, Master Jinshi."

Shoot, she thought, shaking her head reprovingly at herself: she hadn't meant to use his real name. Nonetheless, this was her truest and most

heartfelt response.

So nobody stole the family jewels. So what? It wasn't like she was going to see them. She'd consider the entire matter irrelevant to her.

"As far as you're concerned, I am who I am, eh?" It was hard to name the tone in Jinshi's voice: he sounded thrilled and forlorn at the same time. Maomao heard a rustling, as of Jinshi digging through something. Then a hand reached through the crack in the door. Maomao involuntarily took a step back. "Don't be afraid," Jinshi said. "I just want to give this to you."

So saying, he set a cloth bundle on the crosspiece. Maomao reached out for it, curious, and her fingers brushed Jinshi's. It was only for an instant; their hands had separated again almost before she had time to register his body heat.

"There's something I promised myself I would tell you when I finally gave this to you. You'll recall I started with that bear gall," Jinshi said seriously.

Maomao, ever more intrigued, opened the bundle. Inside were several yellow stones.

"I'm all too aware that the knowledge may bring you trouble in the future, but I want you to know the truth." Jinshi spoke softly, but with conviction.

These are... These are...

"That's why I wanted you to accompany me on this trip." He sounded like he was squeezing out the words one at a time. But they fell on deaf ears.

O...O...

"*Ox bezoars!*" Maomao cried with a leap. So rare and so precious, the thing that had haunted her dreams, and now it was here before her. Her eyes watered and her heart pounded a wild rhythm. She felt her breath coming hard.

Maomao threw open the door. Jinshi, taken completely by surprise, backed away.

"Thank you *so* much!" Maomao bowed.

"Ah, yes, I finally managed to get my hands on—hey! Don't close that door! I wasn't done talking..."

But Maomao slammed the door shut and threw the bar. She didn't want anyone to interrupt her. She twirled a little twirl as she admired her precious ox stomach-stones. Her lips curled into an unusual shape: *hoo hee hee!*

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She thought she heard pounding on the door, but it sounded distant, trivial, compared to the bezoars. They made her so happy they almost carried away Jinshi's behavior that afternoon like a breeze. Maomao's heart was pounding so hard she could hardly hear anything else. She nuzzled her cheek against the stones as she dove into bed.

Kicking her legs heedlessly, she rolled among the sheets, stroking the bezoars with her finger. Just looking at them made her feel like she had the energy to work for a month without rest or sleep. (It was just a feeling, though. If she really did that, she would die.)

She couldn't have cared less whether Jinshi was a eunuch or not. Whichever it was—or wasn't—Maomao had nothing to say about the matter. However, she wasn't so fickle as to be unmoved by a gift like this. She decided that if Jinshi should ever find himself cornered, his secret about to come out, then she would do the very best she could to help him:

If and when that moment comes...

...she would make him a real eunuch.

Quite apart from Maomao's private resolution, the pounding on the door continued, but in her ears it seemed only a faint drumming in the background.

○●○

With the guest of honor safely returned, the afternoon banquet broke up in short order. The various officials made sure everyone knew how relieved they were, transparently toadying. One would never have guessed that a few hours before, they'd been making lewd jokes and snickering about having a little fun with a palace woman.

Gaoshun was worried about Jinshi's obvious fatigue, but he knew he wasn't in a position to do anything about it at the moment. There was no reason for "Gaoshun," who was the attendant of the eunuch "Jinshi," to pay any special attention to the guest of honor. Gaoshun was, after all, merely attending in his master's place. It would be conspicuous if he were to act too interested. He had to trust his son Basen to help instead, but could Basen indeed be trusted to do a decent job?

When Lo-en was formally cleared of suspicion, he made no bones about how indignant he was over the entire affair, but he was a simple personality. Currently, he was quite satisfied with a banquet to cleanse his proverbial

palate. Publicly, the story was that the guest of honor had left the banquet on a whim, and then come back again with no further complications—but most likely, everyone understood that this was a fiction. One group of officials had vanished in the interim and probably wouldn't be seen again for some time.

They had to get some kind of information out of them about these new *feifa*. As for how that information would be obtained, Gaoshun preferred not to know. Anyway, he had work to do. Tonight's banquet was being held on a boat out on the lake. The seemingly endless supply of wine and the crowd of gorgeous women seemed inspired by the old saying about "a lake of wine and a forest of flesh."

Ugh, Gaoshun thought. He was a eunuch, at least as far as it went. He wasn't about to be beguiled by some woman—and should he let himself, the consequences would be dire. He need only think of his wife, the mother of his son Basen, to quell so much as the desire to lay a finger on them.

Speaking of his son, the young man was slumped on the deck of the boat—whether sick from the rocking of the vessel, the quantity of wine, or the women's copious perfume, it was hard to say. Gaoshun sighed: the boy still had a long way to go.

"This must be a terribly tedious affair for a eunuch," said another guest who approached Gaoshun. He'd obviously noticed that Gaoshun's only pastime was sampling the wine. The women fawning over the guests on the boat were younger than his own son. "It's simply dreadful. To have something like this happen, and so soon after you incurred the wrath of the empress regnant!"

The wine seemed to have made the man garrulous—and bold. His remark carried an undertone of mockery.

It was true, though: Gaoshun had once possessed the clan name of Ma, the Horse, but he had angered the empress regnant. He had been given one of the most severe possible punishments—castration, followed by service in the palace—and forced to abandon his old name and call himself "Gaoshun" instead.

At this banquet, however, he was treated not as a eunuch, but as a member of the house of Ma. That was the position Gaoshun was currently supposed to occupy.

"All of that is in the past," Gaoshun said. "Besides, there's such a lovely moon tonight to keep me company as I drink." That was all he said, then he

looked up at the sky. The half-moon was indeed beautiful. He might even have enjoyed it, had it not been for the yammering, boastful men and flirtatious women.

"I must say, though, I'm a touch disappointed our gorgeous eunuch wasn't able to attend," the other man said. He was referring, of course, to Jinshi—and certainly not to the gentleman who was recuperating in his room at that moment.

"Officially, he has a cold. This time, the masked gentleman is here."

"Hah! Yes, I suppose such a lovely face could provoke problems all its own if he were to be present."

This gentleman who never took off his mask had, it was said, suffered severe burns to his face as a child, and had rarely appeared in public since. And he never removed his mask where people could see, no matter how hot it might be.

"Whatever the case, I see *he's* not here tonight. I'm sure he must be tired."

"So it would appear," Gaoshun said blandly, taking care not to let his emotions show on his face.

The evening banquet would go ahead without its guest of honor. Gaoshun poured his wine into the water (*ploop ploop ploop*), watching the waves lap at the side of the boat. He wished the banquet would hurry up and end. The guest of honor wasn't the only one who looked a little off. So did another member of Gaoshun's party, the young woman who had come as his attendant.

It would be understandable if an ordinary young lady who had been swept up with an important personage in an attempt on his life were to find herself feeling rather cowed, but *that* young woman was made of sterner stuff than that. Anyway, she'd been acting a little strange, but not quite like someone who was afraid for her life. She was always courteous (albeit not *too* courteous) to the guest of honor, but now she appeared more distant toward him.

Had he managed to tell her, then?

She was a smart young lady—it shouldn't be surprising if she took that attitude toward him, in light of what it meant for her own future. In fact, the change was subtle enough that anyone who hadn't known her for some time might have missed it. Passing marks for her.

It had been necessary to let her know, considering what might befall the

guest of honor in the future. Gaoshun felt bad for the young woman, but it should also have shown her how useful they found her. The more cards one had in one's hand when things turned ugly, the better. Let people say that the way those cards were gained sometimes required cruelty. He could live with that.

"The Emperor himself must worry, with *him* being who he is. And now all that's happened here..." The official ran his fingers through his beard and sighed. There was a tacit understanding of who had done what. It wasn't a wise subject to bring up, but maybe it was the wine talking. "With *him* as the next in line for the succession..."

The man hardly sounded reverential as he spoke. But who could blame him? The Imperial younger brother almost never left his room, and anytime he did appear in public, he wore a mask. No one considered him fit to conduct politics.

And it was the Emperor's younger brother who was the guest of honor at this hunt.

Many of the officials gathered here had probably come in part out of morbid interest, drawn by this chance to get a look at the prince who was so rarely seen. Not, of course, that they had seen or would ever have seen his actual face. No doubt they now regretted their interest, in light of the attempt on the guest's life. The fact that the banquet was in full swing despite his absence spoke to how desperate everyone was to dispel their despondence.

One suspected there had been a desire to ascertain exactly what kind of person the royal successor was. And now, this official had determined that the answer was: incompetent. Reactions to the obvious deception tended to be twofold: either one decided incompetence was the only explanation, or one chose to watch further. Having settled on the former gave this official a pretext to speak to the eunuch Gaoshun.

"Have none of the consorts become with child since the passing of the Imperial Heir last year?" he asked. This, Gaoshun realized, was what he was really interested in. Who had gotten pregnant, which consort it was, and whether she gave birth to a boy or a girl, could have a seismic effect on palace politics.

Gaoshun slowly shook his head. "No, sadly. But there are a great many consorts, and I'm sure one of them will become pregnant sooner or later."

"I see, I see. Should that happen..." The official glanced at the bower

amidships. There could be seen a portly court official: the host of their festivities, Shishou. It was hard to say whether he was enjoying the guests or simply contemplating everyone around him.

No relatives of the other high consorts were present. It only made sense, this being Shishou's hunt.

The other official left Gaoshun alone, his apple-polishing done for the evening. Gaoshun let out a long sigh and poured himself more wine. Even as he drank a sip, enjoying the company of the lovely moon, he wondered what the guest of honor, Jinshi—or rather, Ka Zuigetsu—was doing at that moment.

Ka Zuigetsu.

The number of people in this country who could boast the character *ka*, flower, in their name was limited. In fact, at the moment, there were only two of them.

One was the man who stood at the very apex of power in this nation. The other was his younger brother.

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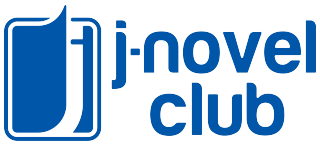

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